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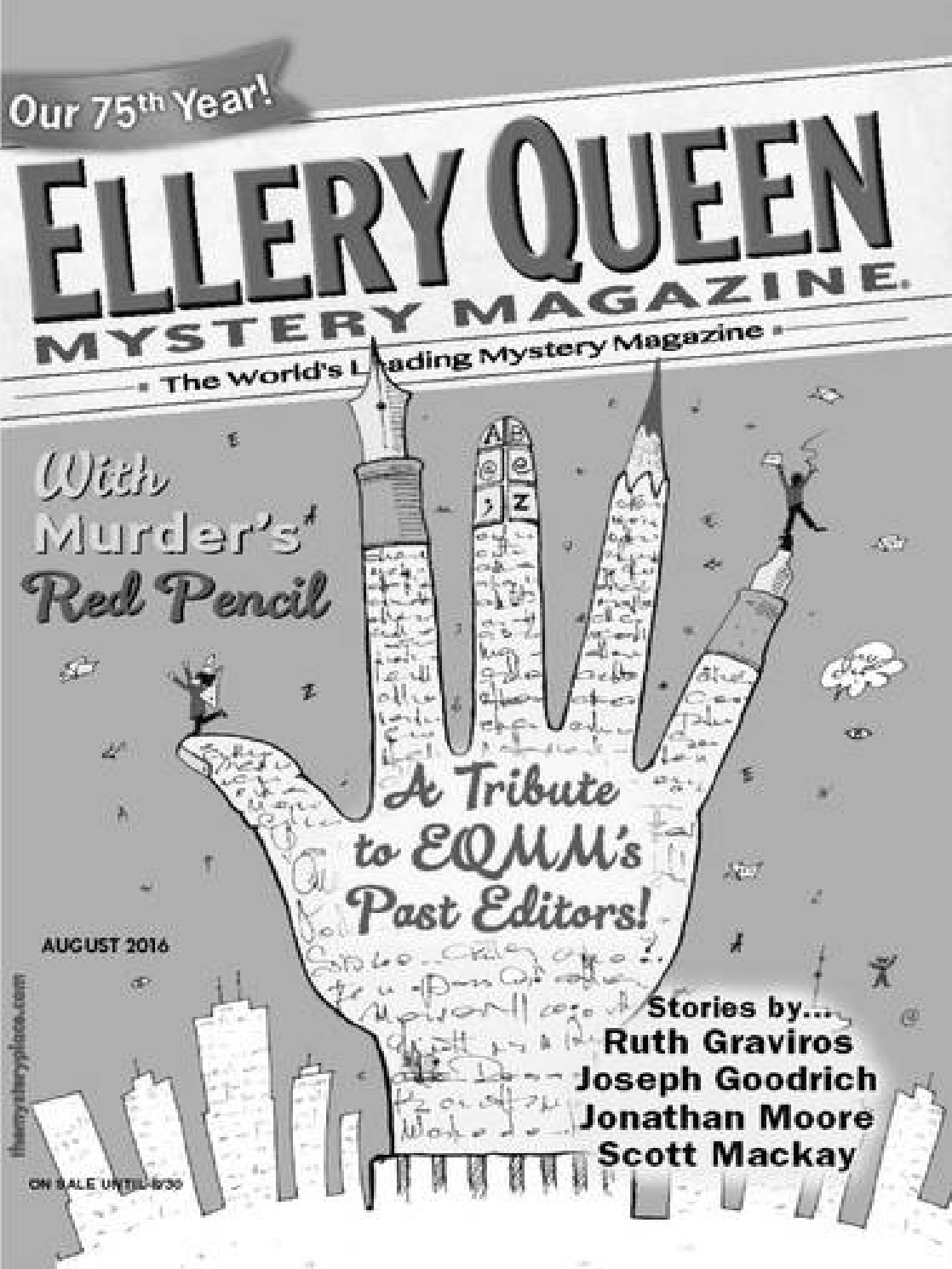

With Murder's Red Pencil

A Tribute to EQMM's Past Editors!

AUGUST 2016

Stories by...
Ruth Graviros
Joseph Goodrich
Jonathan Moore
Scott Mackay

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# Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine

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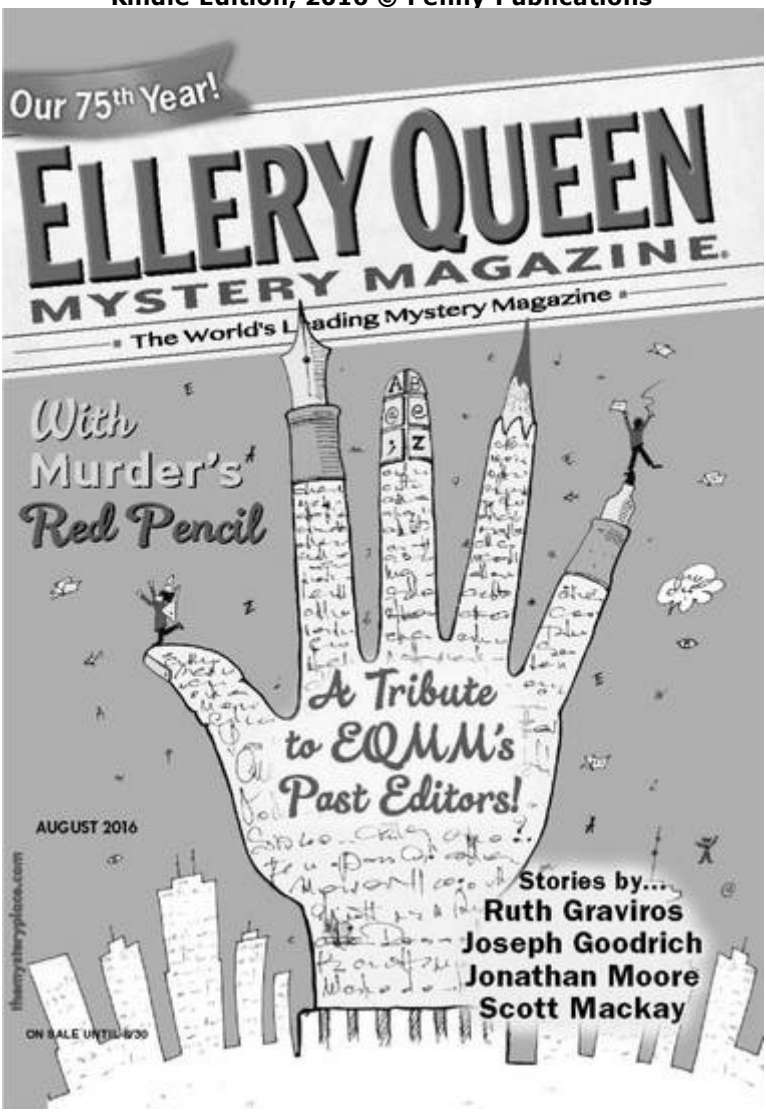

# THE TEN-CENT MURDER

***by Joseph Goodrich*** | 3867 words

**Art by Mark Evans**

**A story by Edgar Award-winning playwright Joseph Goodrich opens this special issue dedicated to *EQMM's* previous editors (see p.10). The star of the tale is *EQMM's* founding editor, Frederic Dannay, who joins forces with Dashiell Hammett to solve a crime in 1950s Manhattan. Hammett and Dannay were, in fact, friends, and Dannay was asked by Hammett to participate in a mystery-writing course he taught. The story's murder, however, is entirely fictional. The latest Goodrich play is *Calamity Town,* from the Ellery Queen novel of the same title.**

Fred Dannay, in a dark-gray overcoat and fedora, heavy briefcase swinging at his side, walked quickly along West Tenth Street. An editorial meeting at *EQMM* had gone on longer than anticipated and he was running late. It was

eight minutes after six on an early autumn evening in 1951. The sky was lambent. The trees still had their leaves, obscuring the brick and stone of the buildings that lined the block, but the air was chillier than a week ago. He was glad he'd worn the overcoat. If only he'd brought his scarf...

He pressed the buzzer of the garden apartment at number 28 and waited. Dashiell Hammett, tall and painfully thin, with a shock of white hair and a dark moustache, opened the door. He was wearing a crisp white shirt with French cuffs and onyx cuff links and sharply creased brown slacks. He greeted Fred, who was shorter by at least a foot, hung up his hat and overcoat, and led him from the small foyer into the living room.

"Sorry I'm late."

"No need to apologize. Drink?"

"Do we have time?"

"They'll wait for us."

"A small one, then."

Dash fixed drinks.

Fred sat on a chair near the fireplace. The grate was filled with cigarette butts and crumpled-up legal-pad pages. He took a scotch-and-water from Dash. "Thank you." He unbuttoned his jacket and exhaled with a sigh. "It's good to be here."

"How's your day in the city been?" Dash poured a scotch, no water, for himself.

Fred sipped his drink. "The train was late this morning. I missed a meeting with Stanley. Things are crazy at the magazine. I've been trying all day to catch up."

"Have you succeeded?"

Fred lifted his bulging briefcase and let it drop back to the floor with a thud. "Not until I've read these."

Hammett whistled. "Jesus."

"I just hope there's a decent story in the lot. Two would be better."

"Don't push your luck."

Fred laughed. "We get a lot of dreck, it's true." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"You all right?"

"Headache." He massaged his temples. "I've had it all day."

"Sure you want to come to class tonight? You wouldn't rather head back to Larchmont and get some rest?"

"I promised I'd be there," Fred said doggedly, "and I'll be there."

"I appreciate it. I know the students are looking forward to meeting you."

Fred put his glasses on. "Any writers in the class?"

"Too soon to tell. They should have a character assignment ready for tonight. That'll help sort out the sheep from the lambs."

"How many students this time around?"

"Three."

Fred was surprised. "Only three?"

"Students have been scared away from the school."

"My God, these are perilous times."

"They're getting worse." Dash sat in the chair across from Fred and lit a cigarette. He gestured to a yellow legal pad and several typewritten pages on the coffee table. "I've spent my day working on that."

Light danced in Fred's eyes. "A new story?"

"A begging letter. It's for the school. They asked me to take a look at it." He smiled. "I'm nothing but a glorified proofreader these days."

"May I?"

Dash nodded. Fred leaned forward and collected the typewritten pages. He adjusted his glasses, then started reading:

*The Jefferson School of Social Science was founded in 1944, and occupies a nine-story building in downtown Manhattan. It is an adult evening school that teaches Marxism, the philosophy and social science of the working class. It analyzes the nature of capitalist and socialist society and studies the general laws of social change, with special emphasis on the United States.*

Hammett watched him, smoke unfurling from his cigarette.

*Today the United States Department of Justice is trying to shut down the Jefferson School—the first time in history our Government has moved to close a school on the basis of what it teaches. Such thoughtcontrol measures are not new in this period of the "Cold War." Many Americans have fallen victim to the growing menace of McCarthyism.*

Fred looked up from the page. "They can't actually shut it down, can they?"

Before Dash could answer, the telephone rang. He tossed his cigarette into the fireplace, crossed the room, and picked up the receiver.

"ORegon 3-3797," he said. A voice buzzed on the other end. Fred watched Dash listening to his caller, then went back to the typewritten page:

*They include teachers and students, trade-union leaders, writers and publishers, artists and entertainers, leaders of the Negro people, and foreign-born persons who have lived here for decades. Thousands have been "investigated" by Congressional committees, hounded by the F.B.I., pilloried in the press, fired from their jobs, deported, barred from travel abroad, or sent to prison—on the basis of what they think and advocate, or what they are suspected of thinking.*

Fred took another sip of his scotch-and-water.

*The drive to intimidate the nonconformists of our time has become so severe that what Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas calls "The Black Silence of Fear" has begun to settle over the people of our country. Much of this drive against so-called "subversives" has been directed against our democratic right to teach and—*

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Dash said.

Fred looked up. He could tell from Dash's expression that something was wrong. He set the page aside.

Dash dropped the receiver into its cradle. He took a long swig of scotch and lit another cigarette.

"What's happened?"

Dash exhaled smoke. "Can they shut the place down? Isn't that what you asked just before the phone rang?"

"That's right."

"Their chances just got a hell of a lot better." Dash downed the rest of his scotch. "That was Peggy Parsons, one of the board members. There's been a murder."

"At the school?"

"Yes." Dash flicked his cigarette into the fireplace and got to his feet. "They want me to talk to the police." He left the room.

Fred stood up and walked to the bedroom door. Dash stood at the mirror, tying his tie with quick, efficient movements. "Who's been killed?"

"One of the staff members."

"Do they have any idea who did it?"

Dash slipped into a tan-and-black-checked sport coat. "They think it was one of my students." He crossed into the foyer and put on his hat and overcoat. "There won't be any class tonight. You can get an early train home."

"Are you kidding me?" Fred, briefcase in hand, bustled into the foyer. He grabbed his overcoat. "I'm coming with you. I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"I'll be glad to have you there. And from what Peggy told me, it sounds like this murder is right up your alley."

"How do you mean?"

Dash would say nothing more. Fred slapped his hat on and followed him out of the apartment.

The black-and-yellow Plymouth Deluxe taxicab let them out in front of the Jefferson School of Social Science, a nondescript building at Sixteenth and

Sixth. They showed their identification to a policeman, massive in his brassbuttoned tunic and cap, and got into the self-service elevator. Dash pushed the button for the seventh floor. The elevator ground its way upward.

"We're lucky," he said, breaking the silence he'd maintained since leaving West Tenth Street.

"We are?"

Dash gave Fred a grim smile. "Usually the elevator's out of order."

While they waited for Detective McAlpine, Dash and Fred talked with Margaret Parsons in an empty classroom. Mrs. Parsons was a striking darkhaired woman in her early forties who favored dungarees and pearls. She came from old money and had new ideas about how to spend it. She funded organizations dedicated to social justice, the improvement of race relations, American-Soviet friendship, and a dozen other causes. She taught an evening class in Dialectical Materialism and, like Dash, was on the school's board.

At twenty minutes to six, Mrs. Parsons had found the body of Morris Rabinowitz, the school's registrar, lying dead on the floor of his office, a letter opener protruding from his neck. Rabinowitz's desk had been forced open and searched. Only one thing was missing: a list of the students currently enrolled in the school. Mrs. Parsons had notified the police and then called Dash.

"You see how horrible this is," Mrs. Parsons said. "Not only is Mr. Rabinowitz dead, but the student list is gone."

"What's so important about the list?' Fred asked.

Dash lit a cigarette. "The school guards that list carefully. If it fell into the wrong hands, it could be used to blacklist or blackmail the students on it."

"We may do away with keeping any lists at all." Mrs. Parsons drew her mink tighter about her. "If this doesn't close us down for good."

Dash aimed a plume of smoke toward the ceiling. "They think it was one of my students?"

"Yes. They were all seen around Mr. Rabinowitz's office within twenty minutes of the time I found him."

"Between five-twenty and five-forty or so?"

Mrs. Parsons nodded. "That's right."

"No one else was around?"

"No. It looks like whoever killed poor Mr. Rabinowitz is one of your students."

"Who saw them?" Fred said.

"Bridie, the cleaning woman."

"Where are they now?" Hammett said.

Mrs. Parsons gestured toward one of the faded green walls. "In one of

the classrooms. Waiting to be questioned."

"Who are they?" Fred said. "What are their names?"

Dash held up a finger for each student. "Penny Meyer. Brendan Nicholl. Salvatore Quarta."

"Wait a second. Penny—Nicholl—Quarta... Their names are all coins, or damn near. You've got to be kidding me."

"I wish I was."

"And that's not all." Mrs. Parsons twisted her strand of pearls. "Mr. Rabinowitz was found with a dime clutched in his hand."

"A dying clue?" Fred shook his head in disbelief. "This is like something out of one of the Queen stories."

"Now you see why I'm glad you're here," Dash said.

"Ellery would know what to do. I'm afraid I don't."

"If only Ellery Queen *were* here," Mrs. Parsons said. "He could solve the murder and save the school."

Fred looked thoughtful. "Would it really?"

Mrs. Parson sighed deeply "At this point, Mr. Dannay, *anything* would help."

Fred paced. Hammett watched him, amused. He could see the wheels turning in Fred's mind.

Fred stopped abruptly. "I wonder," he said, "if Detective McAlpine would let us talk with the students?"

It turned out that McAlpine—a long gray figure in a blue serge suit and a snap-brim fedora—would, but only after he'd questioned them. After a long wait Fred, Dash, and Mrs. Parsons were taken to the glum trio of students.

Penny Meyer was in her late twenties, with ash-blond hair and a deep tan left over from the summer. She was dressed in a bright red tam o'shanter, a black turtleneck sweater, a red-and-black plaid skirt, and black flats.

Brendan Nicholl was in his late twenties. He wore a camel's-hair sport coat, blue shirt and tie, chino trousers, and brown loafers. A crew cut and hornrimmed glasses heightened his resemblance to *Call Me Madam's* Russell Nype.

Salvatore Quarta was the odd man out. He was well into his fifties, heavyset, with a dark complexion and a workingman's hands. His suit was off-therack and his shoes were badly in need of a polish. He was sweating. He looked up from a manuscript held together with a large silver paper clip, then quickly looked down again.

Penny stood up. "Mr. Hammett, isn't it terrible what happened? We couldn't be more upset about it all."

Nicholl and Quarta followed Penny's lead and stood. Dash introduced Fred. Penny said it was an honor to meet him and how nice it was of him to come to their mystery-writing class. Nicholl expressed the hope that Mr.

Dannay would return when things had settled down. Quarta told Fred how much he'd enjoyed *The Origin of Evil* and asked, "Are you working on another mystery?"

"I'm working on one now," Fred said, smiling.

He chatted for another couple of minutes with the students, asking them about their work and their lives, while Dash and Mrs. Parsons watched. Then he crossed to Dash and said in an undertone: "I think I'm onto something."

Dash whispered back. "What?"

They talked together quietly for a time.

"I noticed that too," Dash said.

"Do you want to handle it?"

Dash shook his head. "No. My detective days are over."

"Then I'll ask McAlpine to check on it."

Fred stepped into the hall. A uniformed officer took him to McAlpine. Fred made his request.

McAlpine removed his hat and scratched his head. "The Hall of Records is closed for the day."

"Can you get someone to open it up?"

"I *could,* but I'd need a damned good reason."

"I think I can give you one."

Fred told McAlpine what he'd told Dash. McAlpine listened intently, then hurried off down the hall.

Fred rejoined Dash and Mrs. Parsons. "McAlpine's calling now. He thinks it'll take about an hour to get an answer."

"What is it you're waiting to find out about?" Mrs. Parsons said.

"A wedding ring," Fred said.

"A wedding ring? Why?"

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken, one is missing."

"Who's missing one?"

"One of the students."

Mrs. Parsons looked puzzled. "But none of them is married. I heard you asking them about that. So how can a wedding ring be missing?"

Fred refused to say another word.

Frustrated, Mrs. Parsons turned to Dash. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Yes, but I'm not telling either."

"You're *impossible."* She sat down at one of the desks and folded her arms. "So what am I supposed to *do* for an hour?"

Dash brought out his pack of cigarettes. "Smoke if you got 'em."

Conversation had run out ten minutes before McAlpine and a uniformed officer entered. McAlpine hurried over to Fred and said something to him under his breath. Fred nodded, and McAlpine took a seat.

Fred stood up. Every eye turned to him. He adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, Detective McAlpine has very kindly given me the floor. It's been a long evening for us all, so I'll try to wrap things up here as quickly as possible."

But he took his time before he spoke.

"Morris Rabinowitz was murdered tonight by someone who wanted the list of students currently attending the Jefferson School. I don't know why the killer wanted it, but Mr. Hammett and Mrs. Parsons assure me there are some very good—or should I say some very bad—reasons for stealing such a list. There's a *lot* I don't know. I never knew Mr. Rabinowitz, for instance, though I'm sorry he's dead. John Donne was right: 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.' Mr. Rabinowitz's death diminishes everyone in this room—even his killer."

McAlpine muttered something under his breath, but Fred paid no attention.

"I certainly don't know where the list is. It may be hidden somewhere on the premises, it may be tucked into a shoe or a briefcase, though I presume you've all been searched—or will be. I only know two things. The first is that there are three suspects, all students in Mr. Hammett's mystery-writing class. The second is that I was lied to this evening."

Fred slowly approached Penny Meyer and fixed his gaze on her. She looked up at him with a blank, pleasant expression. "By whom, Mr. Dannay?"

"By you, Miss Meyer. For starters."

The young woman frowned. "I don't know what you mean. I haven't told any lies."

"Earlier this evening you said you're not married."

"I didn't lie. I'm not."

"You got a lovely tan this summer, Miss Meyer," Fred said.

"Thank you. I spent a lot of time at the beach."

"I can see you did. And that's why I couldn't help noticing the white band of skin on the fourth finger of your left hand. That strip of untanned skin is exactly where a wedding ring should be. But you said you weren't married. My only conclusion is that you lied to me. Unless you have another explanation?"

The young woman was silent, lips pursed, and she studied the toe of her left shoe, as if by concentrating hard enough she could make the room and everyone in it disappear.

"Do you have another explanation?" Fred was gentle but remorseless. "If you do, I'd like to hear it."

"So would I," growled McAlpine.

"Well, Miss Meyer? Do you have an alternate explanation?"

The dark head nodded. "Yes, I have." The young woman's voice wasn't much louder than a whisper. "But I wish I didn't have to tell you."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's..." Penny faltered, licked her lips, tried again. "It's too painful." She looked up at Fred, her dark eyes liquid with sorrow. "You were right, Mr. Dannay. I did lie to you. I *was* married. It was foolish to try to hide it from you. I'm sorry. But it's just so hard to talk about...." A tear ran down her cheek. "About Jimmy."

"Jimmy?"

"Jimmy McKelway," Penny said with a sigh. "He was a soldier. We were married just before he was sent to Korea. He died in the Battle of Taejon. It was only the other day I decided to stop wearing his ring." She lifted up her left hand, fingers outspread, then let it drop back onto her lap. "He was a hero, my Jimmy, and I loved him—but I have to live my own life." Her voice throbbed."You understand that, don't you, Mr. Dannay? It's not bad of me, is it? It can't be. I loved him, but I have to be free."

Fred studied the young woman as she shakily dug a handkerchief out of her purse and wiped at her eyes. "That's a very touching story, Miss Meyer. It'd be even more touching if it were true."

Brendan Nicholl sprang to his feet. "How dare you speak to her like that? Hasn't she been through enough without—"

Detective McAlpine cut him off. "You'll get a chance to talk. Don't worry. For the moment, why don't you just sit down and shut up." The young man sat, staring daggers at McAlpine, who, unfazed, gestured to Fred. "Go on, Mr. Dannay."

Fred's tone was mild. "As I was saying, Miss Meyer—your husband isn't dead, and he was never a soldier in Korea. According to the Hall of Records, your husband is very much alive. In fact, he's sitting right next to you. His name is Brendan Nicholl."

"That's ludicrous," the young man said. "I didn't even *know* Miss Meyer until I met her in Mr. Hammett's class. We're not married—we never have been—and as far as I know, we never will be. I wish you'd get that through your heads."

Fred turned to Hammett. "Good, isn't he?"

Hammett exhaled smoke. "He's very good. I like the note of righteous indignation he worked in. It's very effective. I almost believe him."

Mrs. Parsons stirred at Hammett's side. "Why don't you?"

"The records," Hammett said. "Right, Fred?"

"Exactly." Fred looked at the young man, who sat glowering at his desk."The records show that you and Miss Meyer are married. Why you both chose to conceal it—why Miss Meyer isn't wearing her ring—I don't know. But I *do* know this. Judging by the paperback books and newspapers on his desk, Mr. Rabinowitz loved games and crossword puzzles and wordplay. Unable to speak due to a wound in the throat, he still managed to leave a clue to his killer's identity. As he was dying, he dug into his jacket pocket and

picked out a coin, which was found in his clenched fist." Fred stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and made a slow circle of the room. "A coin. Doesn't that strike you as strange? I mean, we have a *room* full of coins here, don't we? *Penny* Meyer, Brendan *Nicholl,* and—stretching things a little—Salvatore *Quarta.* But the coin we found in Mr. Rabinowitz's hand was a *dime.* How could a dime tell us who killed him? I asked Detective McAlpine what kind of change Mr. Rabinowitz had in his pockets. He told me: two dimes and a half-dollar. Nothing else. So Mr. Rabinowitz chose the dime on purpose. But what was that purpose? Who did Mr. Rabinowitz identify as his killer?" He peered at Hammett. "Dash?"

Hammett might have raised an eyebrow a fraction of an inch, and he might not have, but he said nothing.

"Mrs. Parsons?"

Mrs. Parsons shrugged. "I haven't the slightest, Mr. Dannay."

"Neither did I," Fred said, "until I found out that Penny and Brendan are married. Then it all fell into place." He crossed to the two young people. "Mr. Rabinowitz identified you as clearly as if he'd spoken your names. Do you know how he did it?"

Penny looked sideways at Brendan.

"Do you?"

Brendan opened his mouth to speak. Before he could say a word, Fred slapped a coin onto Penny's desk. Everyone in the room—even McAlpine and the uniformed officer—jumped at the *thwack* of flesh and metal meeting wood.

"Rabinowitz identified his killers with a dime," Fred said, pointing at the coin. "For after all, what is a dime but *two Nicholls?"*

It didn't take McAlpine long to get the details. Brendan Nicholl and Penny Meyer had been searching Rabinowitz's desk when the registrar returned unexpectedly. They'd tried to talk him out of calling the police, but Rabinowitz wouldn't give in. Brendan grabbed him when he tried to leave. They struggled. Penny stabbed him in the neck with the letter opener from the desk. They thought he was dead, but he wasn't—not quite. They'd hidden the list in a desk in an empty classroom and planned to sell it to one of the rabid anticommunist organizations that had sprung up over the last few years.

As the school registrar, Rabinowitz knew that Meyer and Nicholl were married. Penny often went by her maiden name. She and Nicholl were experts at the badger game and frequently posed as brother and sister. But that was over now. It was *all* over now.

A week later Salvatore Quarta had dinner with Fred and Dash at the garden apartment on West Tenth. As two-thirds of the students had been arrested

and the class had been canceled, Dash felt he owed Quarta something. After a steak dinner, drink in hand, Quarta read his short story aloud. Fred and Dash offered their critique. It wasn't bad, not bad at all. Some things to fix, some things to think about... but not bad.

As he was buttoning his overcoat, Quarta said, "Say, Mr. Dannay, I was wondering..." He pulled a flat cap out of an overcoat pocket and put it on. "If I was to write up what happened last week at the school as a kind of story—as a piece of fiction, like—I was wondering if maybe you'd think about putting it in *EQMM?* If it was any good, of course."

"Stranger things have happened," Fred said.

They made their goodbyes and, talking nineteen to the dozen, walked off into the chilly autumn darkness. Dash locked the door behind them and sank onto the sofa. He lit a cigarette and smoked it in the ringing silence of the apartment.

He poured himself another drink and went into a small study off the bedroom. A typewriter with a blank sheet of paper rested on a small table. He sat in front of it and contemplated the keys with that old familiar ache. Maybe tonight. Maybe tonight...

# JOURNAL ENTRY, FRANKLIN DEWITT

***by V. S. Kemanis*** | 8190 words

**V.S. Kemanis's first story for *EQMM* appeared in our September/October 2013 issue. At that time she was already the author of many published short stories and the first novel in her Dana Hargrove legal-mystery series had appeared to strong reviews. Her third Hargrove novel, *Forsaken Oath,* was released this past spring. The series was inspired by her own career as a lawyer; she is also a ballet dancer *en pointe,* and she drew upon her dance experience for this story.**

**January 24, 2015**

God or the devil awaits me. On March thirteenth I'll be eightynine, if the earth hasn't claimed me first. It's time to write about Maya.

Alexis encourages me. "Write, Grandpa. Write everything about your life. People want to know." My lively firebird, a promising ballerina. She says she wants to transcribe and publish *The Memoirs of a Ballet Critic.* I won't disappoint her, although I doubt that anyone is interested in the recollections of a teary-eyed man sitting alone in the dark, rapt and spellbound by the beauty he beholds on stage.People would rather know about the private lives of the dancers.

I've known many, but Maya soars above them all. I can't take her story with me and must release it to the world.

Alexis has delivered my lunch on a tray and I'm alone again, without much appetite except for thoughts of Maya.

On Monday, June 5, 1972, New York caught its first glimpse of Maya Volosova and Dmitri Guryev. In that era of famous Soviet defectors—Nureyev (1961), Makarova (1970), Baryshnikov (1974)—Maya and Dmitri fascinated the public more than any others. They were striking and exquisite together. She, twenty-four, he, twenty-five. They were inseparable. They were lovers.

That first day, I was invited to observe the spectacle. We stood awkwardly in a wide semicircle, fifty members of the press corps and theater critics,

enthralled like children around a monkey cage at the zoo. Location: New York Ballet Theatre on Broadway, the grand rehearsal studio, wood-floored, mirror-lined. The defectors, Maya and Dmitri, were performing their tricks for the media. It was silly and beneath them. Their new ballet master had put them up to it. I was awestruck, pen and pad forgotten in my hand.

In moments of rest, the Russians glanced dazedly around the room, shellshocked and disoriented. An irrevocable decision had placed them in this strange land, their proclaimed kingdom of artistic freedom, never to return home. They performed admirably under the circumstances. Maya took a few quick running steps and was suddenly in the air with a light javelin thrust of her legs into a perfect split, torso arched backward. The gallant, muscular Dmitri effortlessly held her overhead. Cameras clicked and whirred. Gently, she alighted, executed a few *piqué* turns, found her lover's forearm, and held it to balance. *Sur la pointe* of one foot, she extended her free leg up behind her in *arabesque.*

Standard steps, nothing new, but Maya had a singular manner of execution, infused with nuance and the illusion of trifling ease, like breathing. Her countenance was relaxed in the sort of aloof loveliness that doesn't even know it exists.

Ballet master Colin Welby, the instigator of this pageant, stood on the sidelines. What great press for him! NYBT had signed the new stars within a day of their setting foot in New York, less than a week after their dramatic leap to freedom during a Kirov tour in Paris.

They finished their partnering stunts, and Colin got them each to improvise a few solo movements. Maya skimmed floatingly on her *pointes,* an ethereal being, waiflike, tiny as a child, a sprite one minute, a goddess the next. When it was Dmitri's turn, our impressions of him died fast. Of course, in 1972, we hadn't yet seen Baryshnikov—the moving picture of the dance—but even then, we knew the difference between greatness and mere competence....

"Did you see that?" I asked Laura Kensington, the arts columnist standing next to me.

"Four pirouettes."

"Only four. And a small stumble."

"Ever so slight. Give him a chance. We'll see...." Clearly he was nothing special, but Laura was willing to wait!

I was already convinced that Maya couldn't be in love with Dmitri, a mere prop standing in the shadow of a ninety-five-pound *prima assoluta.* If anything, he was her ticket to the West. This was my hunch. This I would find out.

It's Saturday, my three-meal day with Alexis. Here for breakfast and lunch, she'll return at dinnertime, after another ballet class and rehearsal. Alexis is

my son's greatest gift, a living angel who attends to me in every free moment. Last year, when it was easier to get out of bed, I sat once again in a darkened theater, this time beholding my lovely granddaughter. Only fourteen then, fifteen now. Already, she's a true artist.

Alexis pores over my scrawl, the only person who understands it. She's convinced that the old ballet critic is a personage of some importance. I won't dissuade her, but I don't kid myself. She wants to know about the famous dancers, not me. If my wife were here, she'd have better stories to tell, but she's been gone now these many years. Her life was harder on account of me, and she died of cancer when Alexis was only a toddler.

"Let me get your laptop, Grandpa," Alexis insists. "I'll set it up for you on the tray." She thinks this will get the words out of me faster. Not anymore, not with these eyes. Though my hand shakes, I can only put pen to paper. A keypad would be useless.

When she returned to pick up my lunch tray, she was surprised to see my plate nearly full. I'd been writing, as she wanted, not eating, as she also wanted. She gave up on feeding me and got me out of bed. A strong girl, she effortlessly supports her old Grandpa as he shuffles around the house and back to the bedroom. Before she left she asked me: "I know you've been writing—may I see it?"

"Not yet, my dear girl."

"Are you writing about *her?"* Alexis urgently awaits the full story of Maya, but I won't show her these pages until I'm near the end.

I've had a moment of shut-eye, when the vision of the first performance came vividly to mind. Friday, June 9, 1972, *Swan Lake.*

The timing of their defection was good for Dmitri and Maya, not so good for others in the company. Colin signed them for the two weeks that remained in NYBT's spring season. Their lawyers (already the defectors had them!) advised against signing away any further rights, leaving them free to perform elsewhere if they wished. Among the several ballets on the daily schedule, three performances remained of the full-length classic *Swan Lake.* Colin bounced the leads, Suzanne Violette and Timothy Jordan, and replaced them with his new darlings of the dance.

A few days of hurried rehearsals were enough to get the Soviets in shape. They knew intimately the choreography of Petipa and Ivanov, which had been their bread and butter growing up at the Kirov. This was not the artistic ideal that Maya and Dmitri had been dreaming of, the abstract, contemporary American ballets that were verboten behind the Iron Curtain. But there was no time for anything else, and it was only fair to make them pay their dues, if only briefly, before casting them in new roles.

That first night, there was a heavy police presence at Lincoln Center. The tension was palpable, a rumbling, wavy mix of ecstatic anticipation and

intrigue. As I took my seat inside the Met, I spotted, scattered along the periphery, several unlikely ballet aficionados: single men, strong-jawed and square-shouldered. Each one scanned the wide hall as he stood with his arms crossed or hands clasped in front, fig-leaf style. I feared for Maya without understanding why. These were the good guys, right? Security guards. But I couldn't decide if they were all in the same camp, if their faces were foreign or domestic, if their occasional, telepathic eye contact with each other conveyed affinity or enmity. One of them stared me down briefly as he made his visual rounds—it was enough to turn my gaze unwaveringly to the stage.

I sat precisely in the middle of the orchestra section, my usual seat, far enough from the stage to appreciate the full panorama, close enough to see the dancers' feet and facial expressions. The defectors injected this classic with a life that Timothy and Suzanne had never achieved. They brought Russian drama to it, a passion and inflection that were so exciting.

Especially Maya, playing the dual role of white swan/black swan. In the second act, as Odette, she was chaste and alluring, trapped and desperate, fated to turn into a white swan by morning, under a spell cast by the evil sorcerer Von Rothbart. In the third act, as Von Rothbart's daughter Odile, she was fiery, devious, and seductive. A temptress in black, transformed by the sorcerer to appear identical to Odette. Maya's rendering of these opposites was astonishing.

Dmitri, the handsome coatrack, did admirably well supporting her as Prince Siegfried, but when the time came for his solo, the mediocre technique and dead eyes lacked the power to inspire. It was just as I'd thought.

Afterward, I joined the company at a private party to welcome the newcomers. You're right, Alexis, maybe I *was* important. Only certain people were allowed into these company events. Big-money patrons were always invited along with a few "inside" reporters and critics. I'd paid *my* dues with two decades of cutting-edge reviews that could make or break careers. Over those years, I'd gotten to know the dance celebrities and, in a way, they included me in their set while I remained an island, authoritatively apart. I couldn't be bought. A good review had to be deserved.

At the party, Maya entered the room on Dmitri's arm. He wore a fashionable sort of dressed-down tux, and she wore a white, watery gown. The clothing was supplied by NYBT. The defectors had arrived in the country without anything except practice clothes.

I was drawn to Maya. I was already in love. Forgive me, darling Zanni, but we weren't married yet. Still single, I was already an old man of forty-six. Far too old for the new object of my desire. She stood at a distance with Dmitri and Colin on either side of her. How was I to edge in between them?

Surprisingly, Timothy and Suzanne were also in attendance, stewing in a corner. Suzanne's red head was difficult to ignore. Although my destination

was Maya, I stopped along the way to converse with the outcasts.

"Did you watch the performance?" I asked Suzanne.

"What else was there to do?" With artistic delicacy, she flung a handful of her ample tresses over a bare shoulder. She was a beautiful, outgoing woman, almost too big and luscious to be a ballerina, about five foot seven, 115 pounds. I'd known Suzanne for sixteen years, from the time she joined the company at the age of eighteen, and as she worked her way up from corps member to principal. Socially, her manner was tart but full of fun. That night, she was all acid.

"I thought you might have avoided it," I suggested.

"Colin wants me to 'learn from her.'"

"Hmm. He couldn't want my all-American girl to become a Russian hot-blood."

"Hah! You should see him lathering at the mouth over his new foundling. Artistically, of course." Suzanne's green eyes flashed. "She *is* an interesting little thing, though."

I turned to her ballet partner. "What say you, Tim? Anything to learn from Dmitri Guryev?"

"Not much that I can see," he retorted.

"I would have preferred to see *you* as the prince tonight," I told him.

Suzanne sputtered into the emptiness where I should have deposited a compliment for her.

"You know how he got here, don't you?" Timothy was on the verge of confirming the rumors then circulating in the media.

"Tell me." I already knew the story, but wanted to hear it from Tim.

He lowered both his brow and his voice, for my hearing only. "Guryev was the one with the connection. Volosova was the one everyone wanted."

"Not surprising."

"You heard about Claude Fournier..."

"The impresario who arranged their escape through the back alleys of Paris?"

" *And* paid their way to New York. Don't worry. He got his kickback. A year ago, that Frenchman made a trip to Leningrad and became acquainted with Dmitri. They conversed quite easily in French. Dmitri doesn't know a word of English, by the way." Tim smirked. "Dmitri whispered his secret desire to defect, and Claude suggested he could help—he's a very close friend of Colin's. But Claude was no fool. He told Dmitri he needed a Kirov prima ballerina thrown into the deal to sweeten the pot."

"And how am I to believe you know all of this?"

"Claude was also... a friend..."

"Of yours."

The male liaisons in the dance world were multilayered. Colin and Tim, despite their age difference, were also rumored to be an occasional couple.

To my credit, Tim must have perceived me as "safe," otherwise he wouldn't have confided such intimate details. Or, maybe he just needed to vent—he was noticeably incensed to have lost his starring role in *Swan Lake* to a second-rate Russian.

"You must be angry at your old friend Claude for making this casting switcheroo possible."

"Let's just say that Claude and I didn't part so nicely. He and Colin are better friends."

"Unlucky for you." But I was already bored with Tim's grumblings and wanted to hear about Maya. It was clear that the Soviet "lovers" were less than that, or something else. Each was the passport for the other. Dmitri needed someone with real talent, and Maya needed a connection. My heart began to pound the seconds until their inevitable breakup. "So, you're saying that Dmitri started up his affair with Maya..."

"... to offer Claude a prize in exchange for his help. But Dmitri didn't need to do much coaxing. It was obvious that Maya was also looking for a window to the West."

At my side, Suzanne was sniffing for attention. "Now that the Kirov has lost their Odette," she said prettily, "maybe *I* should defect to the Soviet Union."

I laughed. "Yes, darling, you do that. Just like Lee Harvey Oswald." But I stroked her head to show it was all in fun. She had such luxurious hair, I can feel it now.

With a few words of condolence, I quickly parted from the disgruntled stars. An opportunity presented itself. Just then, I glimpsed Maya stepping away from Colin and Dmitri, making her way along one of two intersecting lines. I took up the second line and met her about twenty yards away from her male escorts.

"Miss Volosova, let me introduce myself. Franklin DeWitt, columnist. You may have seen my reviews..."

"Yes, yes, of course. I read all the time." What a lovely sound! Her voice was rich and deep for such a petite woman. I expressed my admiration for her command of the English language, and this was her reply: "Many years study. In private. Secret. I know I must come, you see."

"To the United States."

"Yes, this is the home for my art."

"Your art is everything to you?"

"Everything." *Effrytink.*

"You danced beautifully tonight."

Her head dipped slightly. Trite expressions of praise wouldn't impress her; she'd heard these words often enough. If I didn't act quickly, the opportunity would be gone. Behind her, Colin was exuding fatherly anxiety, casting a protective shadow. "When can we meet again? I'd like to interview

you."

She looked up at me for what seemed a long time. In her very high heels, she came only to my shoulder. Almond brown hair, an aristocratic face like a czarina's, unafraid, naked, washed clean of stage makeup. Her eyes were gray with flecks of yellow, framed by thick, scooped lashes.

Before she answered, her gaze darted to the side in a little show of terror at what might be lurking at her back. Both Dmitri and Colin were behind her, but so were a lot of other people.

"Yes," she said after a long pause. And then—how can I forget?—she put her hand on my arm. "We should meet." She was looking into my eyes when Colin came up alongside.

I smiled at him and staked my claim. "Miss Volosova has graciously consented to an interview."

"Really, now?" Colin threw back his head with those artistically longish locks, everlastingly bottle-blond to cover the gray. I was forced to look up his nose for an instant before he lowered his head and directed his eyes at Maya, then me. Having demonstrated his authority to withhold consent, he granted it. "I suppose I can arrange that."

My hand threatens to spasm. The pen is laid to rest.

That Sunday, my review appeared in the *Times* on a full page of the arts section devoted to the defectors. Laura Kensington was a contributor. Nestled inside her prose were photographs, including a closeup of Volosova's face in the role of Odette, full stage makeup and white-feathered headdress. The caption beneath it read: "The lovely Soviet defector prepares to go on stage at the Met." So, Laura and her photographer had gotten to Maya first! Or was this a mock-up with fabricated content, embellished with a smuggled file photo from the Kirov? I examined Maya's image for details. The photo could have been taken anywhere.

The next day, I had my interview. Colin gave us the use of a small office at the NYBT studios. I arrived early and was nervously reviewing my questions when Colin's young boy assistant escorted the ballerina into the room. Maya was dramatically attired in layers of dance sweaters and leg warmers, a long scarf wound multiple times around her neck. "A cold," she said.

For the first ten minutes, while we talked about Maya's training at the Vaganova Ballet Academy, Colin's assistant examined and picked at a hangnail, refusing to budge from his seat. Eventually he left us alone.

I tested the waters obliquely: "That article in the *Times* yesterday... I imagine it was distracting to be interviewed right before going on stage."

"That woman, she arrive in my dressing room. I don't know how."

"Did she say her name?"

"Laura Kenzingk. And a photographer. They bring me some letters."

"Letters?"

She leveled an intense look. " *This* is why we must talk."

*We?* My love for her swelled magnificently—she'd chosen me for a secret! The subject was obviously delicate. Her eyes grew moist with emotion, although it could have been a symptom of her cold virus.

"That woman give me letters from my mother and my brother! 'Heartbroken,' they say. Why did I leave them? Why this... this 'betrayal' of my teachers at the Kirov, my family, and the motherland?"

"Did she say where she'd gotten those letters?"

"She didn't!"

"Do you suppose...?" I stopped myself. A KGB connection to Laura Kensington? It was unthinkable. But there'd been stories like this about other defectors. Attempts to sabotage their performances, backstage "accidents" with falling props, faked or coerced emotional letters from family members. The object was to crush any chance of success in the West, or to instill enough guilt that the defector would return home and be charged with treason, stripped of any further life as an artist. Defection was an intolerable insult to the Soviet delusion of cultural supremacy.

"It was their handwriting, but it was not them."

"How was it 'not them'?"

"My mother and brother—they want for me what is the best. They never write these things. Oh, Franklin..." the tears started to fall, "tell this woman to stay away!"

"You want me to tell Laura..."

"You know her, yes?"

"I do."

"Tell her do not come! Never try to see me again!"

Uncertainty fueled her torment. Either the KGB had forced the hands of her mother and brother, or her family members had, on their own, penned their sorrow and arranged for its delivery. Either possibility was unbearable. Maya needed protection from Laura Kensington and any other would-be messengers. I gladly accepted the challenge, even though I feared that Maya had no other use for me. Perhaps, with time, her feelings would run deeper than mere gratitude.

Maya gave me the address where she and Dmitri were staying—a carefully guarded secret—and warned me of heavy security. I promised to visit her the following night, to give her an update of my efforts. She promised to hold her bodyguards at bay.

I couldn't sleep all night, thinking of her. The next morning, I sought out two people. First, Laura. On the way to her office, I was jittery with fatigue and had the sense of being followed, even without any overt signs of it. When I arrived, Laura's secretary was in the anteroom. No one else was around. I went inside and closed the door behind me, feeling nervous and slightly silly. No one could hear us, but I imagined a bug.

Assuming the role of FBI agent, I interrogated her rapid-fire, bait and trap. I was woefully inept. She gave me this explanation: "A little man with a Russian accent came up to me outside the theater and handed me those letters. 'Gee-ef dees to Volosova. Letters from family.'"

"A stranger?"

"Of course a stranger. You think I run around with types like that?"

"How on earth did he know who you were and where you were going?"

"I have no idea. It was a little creepy, I admit...."

"And you didn't think it through. Anything could have been inside those envelopes! What was written on the outside?"

"Her name, that's all. Come on, Franklin. Cut out the Dick Tracy. It would have been cruel to hold back letters from her family. What would *you* have done?"

"Gone to the police."

"Not when the best interview of your career is waiting. You would have done the same."

"Maybe, but..."

"Your envy is showing. I got to her first, plain and simple. Got past the gatekeepers before you did. So there. Accept it."

I accepted it and didn't mind so much that Laura got the first interview because I'd been given something far better. Maya had made me her trusted confidant and protector. But I wasn't about to reveal this. "Your visit upset her greatly, that's all I can say." I turned to go. "I suggest you stay away from Maya to avoid causing her any further distress." It was a pitifully weak demand, and I had nothing to back it up. Laura only smiled at me with shining eyes.

Feeling put down and inadequate as a detective, I went back to my office to await my second appointment of the day: Suzanne. I wasn't sure how, but I wanted to use her as my informant. She was the person I knew best in the company and the only one I could approach. She was also likely to be in daily contact with Maya, since they were at similar levels of virtuosity, and Colin had told Suzanne to "learn from her." There was resentment, to be sure, but I figured that Suzanne would get over it. She had a heart of gold, could see the business logic behind Colin's decision, and was confident enough to know that he hadn't replaced her. At thirty-four, she was an exciting, mature dancer at the height of her career.

I asked Suzanne how Maya was doing, and immediately, she sensed my interest and concern.

"Ah, you have a little crush!" She mocked me. "You have nothing to worry about. Maya is perfectly happy, except for that worm of a boyfriend, Dmitri."

"What's he up to?"

"Every time I see those two together they're spouting off in hot Russian, 'nyet' this and that. Nothing at all like their on-stage love affair."

I was heartened to hear this. A breakup in the works! In my obsessive state, I was sure this meant a chance for me. "Nothing violent, is there?"

"I saw him grab her arm once. She pulled away and cursed wildly in Russian."

"Your interpretive skills are amazing."

"Anyone could figure it out."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"Not much. But this morning, before class, we were in the studio together, sitting on the floor, banging out our new *pointes.* Her only complaint about defecting is that she has to get used to another maker. She claims her new shoes are inferior."

I thought nothing of this. Professional ballerinas need two or three pairs of *pointe* shoes every day and love to complain about them. A ballerina's "maker" is a cobbler who knows her foot intimately and hand-crafts each shoe to unique specifications. The stiff toe box is created from layers of cardboard, glue, and fabric, stitched and nailed to a leather sole. Each ballerina has her own ritual for molding the shoes to her liking before putting them on, hammering, floor banging, or mashing the toe boxes between sensitive hands. After a few hours of wear, the shoes are "dead." Limp and useless.

"Who's her new maker?"

"Stanley Graven. Sign of the cross." Graven's unique symbol was a Maltese cross, which he impressed on the bottom of every sole.

"Who's the old maker?"

"Don't know. The imprint is"—she deepened her voice—"a hammer and sickle."

I shuddered. "Comrade ballerina!"

"She still has about a dozen pairs from her old maker," Suzanne continued.

"The box just arrived by air freight—a friend of hers in the Kirov smuggled them out of her dressing room in Paris. They're in the storage room reserved for the principal dancers. It's under lock and key, but she seems nervous to let them out of her sight. She puts on a pair only when she's feeling especially insecure."

"The great ballerina feels insecure?"

"You know. Homesick. And I think she's missing someone she left behind."

"Her mom and brother."

"Nope. I'm guessing it's a boyfriend. We all know Dmitri is just a cover."

"Well, sure, we all know about Dmitri, but how do you know there's someone else?" I tried to remove the adolescent squeakiness from my voice.

"I just know it. She hasn't said anything. It's intuition. That's something we women have, Franklin. Intuition."

In that moment, I admired Suzanne enormously. She was compassionate

and magnanimous toward her little sister, a girl ten years younger, who should have been regarded as a rival in the company. I asked Suzanne to look after Maya, to protect her from harm, to report back to me what was going on inside the studios and the theater.

But this was asking too much, and she resisted. "Why should I, Franklin? She's a big girl. She doesn't need a mama." Her eyes were on fire. She was vivacious and even more redheaded in her rage. But there was mockery in her emotion. She knew me too well. Why should she humor a man driven by lust? "Maybe she's homesick and lonely," said Suzanne, "but she made her decision and will have to live with it."

I enjoyed her honesty and was beginning to see, maybe a little bit, how I really felt about her. I squared my shoulders and acted the grownup. "Suzanne, I've known you half your life. You're the only real friend I have on the inside. I can't reveal all the details, but there've been some threats. You have to believe me. She needs someone to look out for her."

After further arm-twisting, she came around to the idea. I was grateful and thanked her with an embrace before we parted. Alone with Suzanne's perfume on my collar, I counted the minutes until nine P.M., the appointed hour for my visit to Maya's apartment.

NYBT was housing the Russians in a luxury high-rise on the Upper East Side. When I arrived that evening, the uniformed doorman told me to wait in the vestibule while he summoned a scary-looking fellow in the lobby. I gave that man my name and purpose and showed him identification. Maya had preapproved my visit, and he waved me ahead. Another such man was standing outside her apartment door on the twelfth floor, and I repeated my demonstration.

Maya came to the door wearing a purple dressing gown, her feet bare. Behind her, on the living-room floor, she'd left a basin of Epsom-salt water and a towel.

Stripped of their pink satin adornment, a ballerina's feet are not always a pretty sight. Corns, calluses, blisters, bunions, and blood. If a shoe suffers a premature death in the middle of a performance, or if something else isn't quite right with it—a hard bulge, a broken arch, the tip of a nail protruding from the insole—the dancer must stay on her toes, maintaining the illusion of ease.

Maya's feet were no exception. I caught a glimpse of them before averting my eyes to the couch, where Dmitri was sitting. He stood. In reply to my greeting he said, "Hello," and gave me a blank look when I asked, "How are you enjoying your new home?" He nodded and said, "Yes." In the awkward silence that followed, he said, "Pardon," like a Frenchman and left the room. Timothy was right. The man didn't understand a word of English.

"Come and sit," said Maya, gesturing toward the couch. It was long and plush, with white cushions. I took one end and she took the other, tucking

her battered feet beneath her. There were dark circles under her eyes. She gave me a wan smile, her vitality expended and left behind in the NYBT studios, where she'd had a grueling day of class and rehearsal. Sitting on the couch in the intimacy of her home, I didn't feel quite inside my own body as I regarded her tiny form across from me, a presence so diminutive yet momentous that she appeared translucent, of another world.

The goddess spoke: "Tell me that you talk to her. That woman."

I assured her that Laura Kensington would no longer be a bother. It was a bold statement at odds with reality, something I couldn't vouch for. I said nothing about my agreement with Suzanne.

"This is not interview," Maya said, waving her hand in a circle. "None of this, about the letters. You print nothing."

"I wouldn't dream of it." But how could she trust me? Even today, it astounds me that a defector from the Soviet Union, a person conditioned for a life of wariness and vigilance, would assign such a sensitive mission to a relative stranger. But I still had a boyish, innocent face, well into middle age. I'm sorry you wouldn't know it now, Alexis. I can't bear to look at myself in the mirror.

I told Maya: "I will do everything in my power to ensure your safety and your ability to concentrate on your art."

"Thank you. I am grateful."

We talked for an hour or so, more about her life than mine. Her words and gestures were veiled in a mood of profound sadness. With Dmitri nowhere to be seen, hidden away in another room, our discussion was free. Toward the end I remarked, "I've heard you're disappointed with your new maker."

"Pfft! Shoes are terrible. Pavel is the only one knows my feet." She looked off into the distance. Instantly, I knew there was something under the surface. Perhaps some of Suzanne's feminine intuition had rubbed off on me. "Pavel?"

"Yes, Pavel Shirokov. My 'maker' is how you say it. He knows my feet, the high instep, the short baby toe, the spreading metatarsal. He knows this. No one else." Her eyes had grown misty.

"I hear that Stanley Graven is excellent. If you give him some time, he'll get to know your feet just as well."

"I doubt very seriously." She jumped up from the couch. It was my signal to go. I had, of course, botched this meeting very badly. By mentioning Stanley Graven, I'd given away my connection to Suzanne. How else would I have known this detail?

Near the front door, she found the energy to come out of her funk momentarily. Charmingly, she rose up on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. "Thank you for that Laura person."

I was in heaven. "May I come backstage after your performance

tomorrow?"

"If they let you. They watch the door now. Very careful. After that other time, I tell them no one."

"Let no one in?"

"No one."

My heart sank again. I should have been elated to know that she was taking control of the situation. It was her assertion of that control against *me* that was so disappointing.

As I walked out the door, I didn't know it was the last time I would see her alone.

I heard a key turn in the lock.

Alexis has just gone, and I've gained a second wind. I ate a bit of dinner, had another stroll on her arm, and can face the night, alone. A single beam of lamplight falls upon this page.

In the dark again, I sit. Wednesday, June 14, and Sunday, June 18, 1972, the final performances of *Swan Lake.*

Don't think that I didn't try to see her again. After Wednesday's performance, I sought entry at the usual backstage door but was cut off, all my goodwill and insider status of no value. The following night, and the night after that, I went to her apartment building. The bodyguards were under strict orders to turn me away. A few times, in broad daylight, I visited the NYBT studios. Colin was not available. Neither was Maya. I took these rejections personally, although there was no reason to doubt that her instructions pertained to the world at large.

Twice daily, I contacted Suzanne for a report. "You worry for nothing," she said every time. On Sunday afternoon, the day of the last performance, she said, "Thanks to you, we're now the best of friends. She's a fascinating little thing! Doing just fine and so happy to be here. Maybe a little tired and stressed, but no sign of any goons on her trail."

"Are you *sure* she would tell you if there were any threats?"

"How would I know? We've been friendly for such a short time. But I do know this—she's on to you, Franklin!"

"On to me?"

"She knows you've been trying to see her. Every day. She mentioned it before class this morning. 'You know this man Franklin? Should I be worry for him?'"

"Worried about *me?"*

"You, sweetheart. I told her you're harmless as a kitten. Still, I would bug off if I were you."

Her advice fell on deaf ears. I was certain to keep trying... *if* I'd had the chance.

In the dark then and now, I see and feel everything again. At the Met, as

the lights dim and programs rustle, the overture begins, and I wait impatiently for Maya to take the stage. For the last time.

In the third act of *Swan Lake,* Prince Siegfried is tricked into declaring his love for Odile, the deceptive double conjured by Von Rothbart. In the fourth act, the prince returns at midnight to the *lac des cygnes* where he begs for, and receives, Odette's forgiveness. But they're powerless to overcome the sorcerer's spell. The prince's betrayal has sealed Odette's fate. Come morning, she'll turn into a white swan again, this time forever. The despairing lovers cast themselves into the lake.

In the moments before her stage suicide, Maya's portrayal of Odette transcends the boundaries of despair. Her swanlike arms flail limply, her knees buckle. I'm transfixed, in shock. This isn't the choreography. With a tripping run instead of a soaring leap, she casts herself into the lake and disappears. Dmitri follows with a *grande jeté.*

The apotheosis. In the final moments of the ballet, the lovers glide into the afterlife on a gentle, uplifting theme. As the strings beat out their quiet strokes, the stage remains empty except for the lake—rippling sheets of midnight-blue fabric catching a moonbeam. Behind a transparent backdrop, the lovers rise into the sky on a heavenly cloud.

Something is wrong. I choke out a cry. Around me, people are gasping. Dmitri is struggling to support Maya, holding her by the waist with one arm, his free arm overhead in fifth position. His face is stricken with panic. Limp and feeble, Maya is folded nearly in half over his arm, her torso arched back and arms flung behind her, *arabesque* drooping, *pointes* collapsed. With a final effort to lift herself up, she falls backward onto his arm with an audible rasp and a catlike screech.

My eyes are a blur of tears. Help me, dear God!

The grandfather clock strikes twelve. I've fallen asleep briefly, wanting to forget.

We were in the dark. The house lights were off when the curtain fell on a scene of panic. An army of police officers swarmed into the audience, taking us hostage. The lights flicked on, revealing pure chaos. Later, I learned the details.

In full costume, Maya's lifeless body was transported by ambulance to the hospital. Colin and Dmitri were fast behind in a taxi. As soon as they arrived, death was pronounced. Was Dmitri heartbroken? He'd just lost his meal ticket. Without Maya, the plum roles were no longer guaranteed. Was Colin heartbroken? Businesswise, he'd lost nothing. The contract was fulfilled, and Maya hadn't promised to sign another. Colin made sure he had the whiteswan costume and toe shoes in hand before leaving the hospital. These artifacts would fetch thousands at auction, and the company needed the cash.

Maya's death stunned the world and grew to mythical proportions with the discovery of a note on her dressing-room table. "Pavel, this performance is for you. I'm wearing the last pair." Hasty translations of her Russian distorted the message into a suicide note. Her last performance. The last pair of shoes she would ever wear. Torn from her lover, ruing her mistake, Maya had publicly committed the ultimate act. She had gone to meet her maker.

But how? Rumors abounded. Depression and unrelenting physical demands beat her down to a wisp, making her susceptible to a hidden weakness. A brain aneurism. A congenital heart defect. She'd starved herself and collapsed from pure exhaustion and dehydration. She had willed herself to die.

Several days later, the autopsy revealed the cause: cyanide poisoning. A horrible death by chemical asphyxia, its climax marked by the "death scream," an involuntary response to the internal collapse of her lungs. Questions were answered and others were raised by the medical examiner's strange findings. Not ingested or inhaled, the poison was injected into her left foot, the lateral plantar artery. Who would devise such a bizarre method of suicide?

The district attorney opened an investigation. Search warrants were executed at the Met, the NYBT studios, and Maya's apartment. No syringes were found, but already a week had passed—plenty of time to destroy evidence. Sharp minds said, "The left shoe!" Colin was forced to relinquish the *pointes,* and here they discovered the instrument of her death: a tiny, hollow nail, designed to work its way through the insole and act as a syringe with the pressure of a well-placed *plié-relevé.* To Maya, the prick of pain would have been a small annoyance not unlike any other indignity a ballerina must endure from a negligently crafted shoe. The potent poison gradually worked its way through her body as her heart pumped, delivering death in the final moments of the ballet.

The mystery deepened when the soles of the deadly *pointes* were examined. They bore no symbol at all, neither Maltese cross, nor hammer and sickle.

The shoes were sent for analysis, to uncover their maker, and the search for conspirators began. Someone had placed those shoes in the box and someone had made sure that she wore them. No one was exempt from interrogation. Dozens of people were hauled into police headquarters. In France, depositions were conducted of Claude Fournier and others involved in the Paris "leap to freedom."

Immediately, I came forward with everything I knew, the names of the makers and their marks, and Laura Kensington's delivery of the letters. Laura was the person of greatest interest to the police. Repeatedly, they questioned her about the little Russian man we supposed was a KGB agent.

A sketch artist made a drawing of the suspect, and it was printed on the front page of every newspaper in the country and across Europe.

Ultimately, Laura wasn't detained, because she clearly had no motive to harm Maya. Nor did any of the other key figures. Not Dmitri (he needed Maya) or Colin (he hoped for a long-term contract) or Claude (he'd received his finder's fee), or Stanley Graven (he was pleased with the new, lucrative toe-shoe account) or Pavel Shirokov (he loved her).

Or me or Suzanne.

Forgive me, Alexis, I must stop here.

This story is not about Maya. No, it is not.

How can I say this? You've seen the old newspaper stories and your father and I have explained some of it. I won't be guilty of another sugarcoating.

I go on.

A month after the murder, the public was aching for a culprit, someone to string up. Anonymous tips flooded in. Innocent men were detained on the basis of their slightest resemblance to the sketch in the newspaper. By then we knew that the shoes were made in the USSR, as confirmed by the inferior quality of the pink satin and other materials which were identical to those in the hammer-and-sickle shoes, a few "dead" ones that Maya had left behind. No question, Pavel was the maker, though his mark was missing. A motive was easily contrived. Heartbroken and angry at Maya for leaving him behind, Pavel became a willing participant in a KGB plot. A cry went out for his arrest, but it was impossible. The only extradition treaty on the books was of questionable validity, signed by the leaders of the U.S. and tsarist Russia in 1893. Even so, Article IV of that treaty relieved the parties of any requirement "to deliver up their own citizens or subjects." Pavel was safe.

I cannot remember the name of the detective who interviewed me. I've blocked it from my mind. He was scarlet-faced, dogged, and persistent. I was afraid, I remember that. Afraid for my own sorry self, convinced that I was one of a handful of suspects who'd been allowed entry into Maya's private residence.

I told him: "Miss Volosova granted me a single interview at the NYBT studios. We ran out of time that day, and she permitted me a short visit to her apartment the next night to complete the interview." I indulged in a silent sigh of relief, having confessed the most damning fact.

"Do you have the clipping?"

At this, I balked and shivered. "Clipping?" In my gut, the emotion and guilty knowledge roiled: my shameful desire for a woman half my age, my promise not to print our interview, my belief in a secret mission to protect her. I felt childish and ineffectual. How could I claim the status of protector when I hadn't protected her? "I was still working on the article when she died. It was never printed."

The detective smirked. "How long does it take to write an article?"

"I was working on a special column, a long retrospective, a life story."

He didn't look convinced, so I kept blathering. "I needed to do more research on defectors and artistic freedom, perhaps add some details comparing the daily routines of dancers in the two countries. For instance, Maya—Miss Volosova—made an interesting observation to another ballerina in the company, a complaint about the feel of her American *pointe* shoes. It was only a pet peeve because, really, she was ecstatic about being in this country. She told Suzanne as much on the day she died...."

"That would be Suzanne Violette?"

"Yes."

"She was the ballerina who told you about Volosova's *pointe* shoe complaint?"

I didn't answer, but my face must have said it all.

"She was the one with the victim before she died?"

"Well, yes, they were friends...."

"Friends? But Volosova took her place in the company."

"Not exactly. Just a few performances."

I froze up, fearing that I'd said too much already, and said nothing to explain, nothing to help her.

In the following days, I badgered other company members into telling me what they'd said to the police. The floodgates were open: Many had seen the two ballerinas together, giggling, sipping tea, banging out their *pointes,* making trips to the locked storage room where they both kept their toe shoes. Someone even claimed to have glimpsed Suzanne in the company of a funny little man who looked very much like the sketch published in the newspaper.

Early one morning, I picked up the ringing phone and heard this: "Franklin! I've been arrested!" Suzanne was allowed a single phone call, and I was the person she called. I was that person because she loved me, and at that moment I knew that I loved her.

Shame enveloped me. Yet I said nothing to her or to the police. The front page of the newspaper had a photograph of my beautiful Suzanne in police escort beneath the headline: "Ballerina Accused of Conspiracy to Murder."

I found a lawyer for her. But I said nothing.

I visited her in jail. But I said nothing.

A grand jury was impaneled to hear the evidence and hand up an indictment.

My brave Suzanne exercised her right to testify. Although the proceedings were secret, I imagined her testimony from everything she told me later:

Prosecutor: "Ms. Violette, tell us about the last time you spoke with the victim."

Zanni: "I visited her dressing room about fifteen minutes before curtain. I

wished her good luck and a beautiful performance."

Prosecutor: "Was she wearing her *pointe* shoes?"

Zanni: "Yes, but they wouldn't be the ones... the poisoned ones."

Prosecutor (snidely, I imagined, with a wink to the foreperson of the grand jury): "And how would you know that?"

Zanni: "She was wearing the shoes for the second act, when she makes her first appearance. She had different shoes for the third and the fourth acts."

Prosecutor: "And why is that?"

Zanni: "The shoes are pale pink for the second and fourth acts. They're black for the third act."

Prosecutor: "So, when you saw her last, she was wearing the pale pink shoes for the second *and* the fourth acts?"

Zanni: "No, just the second act. The shoes are dead after a single act and can't be worn again."

An unfortunate choice of words.

In all of this, Suzanne uttered not a word about my putting her up to it, my obsession, my repeated attempts to get to Maya. Wouldn't *that* have been a pretty motive for murder? The leering stalker failed to get the girl. But Suzanne, with her pure heart, knew that my desire was mere folly, a middleaged man's last fantasy before he finally grew up. She did not betray me, unaware that I had betrayed her.

The prosecutor put the conspiracy charge to the twenty-three grand jurors for a vote. We won't blame them. They were ignorant of everything discovered twenty years later, after the fall of the Soviet Union. They didn't know about the memorandum between the First and the Second Chief Directorates of the KGB, outlining "The State's Problem of Defectors in the Arts." They didn't know about the design of the death shoe, like Sputnik, a glorious achievement of Soviet science, developed after Makarova's defection in 1970. By 1972 the design was perfected, just waiting for the next defector. While Maya was on tour in Europe, Pavel was innocently making a pile of her shoes, looking forward to her return. Immediately after Maya's defection, the Soviet authorities confiscated the lot as "property of the People," found a pair to which Pavel had not yet affixed his imprint, and inserted the lethal nail. An agent planted the pair in Maya's box of shoes in Paris, and during the days after her defection, made sure that a "friend" in the Kirov shipped the box to her in New York.

The rest of the plot relied on her love for Pavel's shoes and the certainty that she would eventually wear them all. It was mere chance—or was it?—that she happened to pick the fatal pair for the fourth act of the final performance of the season. Did she notice the difference in these shoes, the lack of a mark? After her death, the crooked scheme claimed another victim. Pavel heard the news and guessed that his shoes had been the instrument

of her death. He committed suicide by hanging.

None of this was known at the time the grand jury voted to indict Suzanne on conspiracy to murder. And none of it was known to the judge (bless him!) who reviewed the grand-jury testimony and threw out the indictment. In a packed courtroom, the judge proclaimed the investigation to be a witch hunt and the indictment a product of prosecutorial overreaching. The charge rested on the flimsiest of evidence, which wouldn't hold up in court. Suzanne was released, but she was traumatized, unable to dance for two years. A career at its height was left in ruins from the humiliation of a cruel notoriety. When she returned, it was only to dance supporting roles for a few years before an early retirement.

Oh, how I loved her! Weak as I am, cowardly as I am, I loved her. We were blessed with a son, your father. I love you both. Alexis, you must believe that.

Instead of *Memoirs,* shall we call this book *The Confessions of a Ballet Critic?* Does it lessen my guilt to pretend that my sins were of no consequence? Zanni, kind soul, would have befriended Maya anyway. She was just as fascinated by her as we all were. On the day Suzanne was released into my arms, this is what she said to me: "After everything, I'm saddest of all that Maya is gone. She was pretty and funny and so exquisite to watch. She was a tigress and a homeless orphan. She was the real victim here."

And still, I said nothing. How I betrayed you, how I made you suffer, Zanni! Did you know of my cowardice? Did you find me out all those years ago when I breathed not a word?

My hand aches, but my heart aches more.

I must write.

But I haven't the strength.

God, take me! I'm ready to meet m

**January 25, 2015**

A ray of light passes through the opening in the curtain.

With every new day, I grow weaker. It's time to write about Suzanne Violette, the most stunning ballerina the world has ever known.

# THE CARETAKER OF LORNE GREEN

***by Dave Zeltserman*** | 5685 words

**The author of many acclaimed novels and of the Shamus and *EQMM* Readers Award-winning Julius Katz stories, Dave Zeltserman will begin a new crime-thriller series under a pseudonym next year: Look for *Deranged* by Jacob Stone (Kensington, March 2017). The Boston author has his thriller writer's hat on for this new story, but he'll be back with another private-eye tale in the Julius Katz series next month.**

I'm a half-hour late getting the old guy out of bed, and that must be why he's in such a sour mood. After I wheel him into the bathroom, I put him in a bear hug so I can lift him from his wheelchair and deposit him into the tub, and he sits sulking, his thick lips curved down into a steep frown. He doesn't utter a peep the whole time I'm scrubbing his back with a brush, nor later after I get him back in his chair and shave him and clip his nose and ear hairs. I don't much feel like doing any of that this morning, but if I don't he'll be crying about it all day.

I'm hoping he stays pouting like this. I can use a day without him yakking. But no such luck. After I get him dressed and sitting at the kitchen table for his cereal and morning coffee, his mood perks up and he gets talkative.

He exaggerates a wink at me. "You want to guess how much action I used to get?" he asks.

"I'm guessing a lot."

"Damn straight! You want to know why?"

I play my part and say, like he's expecting me to, "It's got to be 'cause of how much you look like that actor, Lorne Greene."

That cracks him up and he starts laughing, these wheezing, cackling noises coming out of him, his face reddening. When I was a kid I used to watch *Bonanza* reruns, and if I squint hard enough I can see the resemblance in his round, wrinkled face, even though on first appearance it looks more like a deflated basketball with a couple of caterpillars glued on than the face of any famous actor. But then again, the old guy's got to be at least eighty, so it's not fair for me to judge him the way he is now, with his cavedin chest and bald head and wrinkly old face covered with moles and growths. When he was younger, he might very well have looked like Ben

Cartwright from the Ponderosa. I imagine how he might've been with broad shoulders, a younger, more robust body, and his own teeth instead of the cheap dentures stuck in his mouth, and I can almost see it.

"That's right," he says when he can, although he's still laughing so hard the words come out in these gasping wheezes. "Back then I had a deep baritone voice, just like he did. When I told the girlies I was Lorne Greene, a lot of them believed me right away. The ones who thought I was only kidding around changed their minds after I showed them my driver's license."

His froglike, raspy voice is grating on me and starts bringing about a headache. We've already had this same conversation at least a dozen times, maybe more. But like any good straight man, I feed him the line he's expecting. "If they looked closely enough, they would've seen your last name's spelled differently."

"You bet it is," he says, his wheezing laugh dying down, his expression growing peevish. "I don't got that extra 'e' at the end. The judge wouldn't allow the same spelling. He thought I was trying to pull a fast one changing my name to Lorne Greene, and tried telling me I had a perfectly fine name with Arnie Crenshaw and that I should just keep it as it was. What the hell did he know? Why would I keep a name like that when I could get all the action I could handle by changing it? I told him, your honor, I'm over twenty years younger than that actor. How could anyone in their right mind mistake me, a thirty-twoyear-old guy, for some actor in his late fifties? But I couldn't get him to budge."

"He was being unreasonable."

His lips pucker in and out as if he's tasting something bitter. "Damn straight he was," the old man spits out. His eyes dull as if he's lost in a memory, then he shrugs and continues, "We dickered back and forth until he finally agreed to let me change it to *Lorne Green,* without the 'e'. The joke was on him. Lorne Greene was the actor's stage name. His real name was Lyon Green. Whenever a lady noticed the difference in the spelling on my license, I'd tell her how *Greene* was my stage name, and they almost always bought it." He slaps his knee and starts cracking himself up again and says, "I remember these sisters in particular when I was traveling through Kansas City. Three of them—"

I try to tune him out and not listen to how he bagged those three Kansas City sisters on a rainy afternoon some forty years ago. I've heard the story several times already. I must've heard all of his stories by now, and his voice has become like nails on a chalkboard. I can barely stand it. As he blathers on I wait for him to take more sips of the instant coffee I made for him. Earlier I had ground up half a sleeping pill and stirred the powder into the drink. He's already had enough of the doped coffee that he's slurring his words and his eyelids are drooping. Another few minutes and he'll nod off. That should give me a couple of hours of quiet, and time to search more of

the house. If I didn't have to worry about a relative or social worker or someone else dropping by, I'd gag him and tie him up until I find where he has his money hid.

Thirty-eight days ago I was working as a bag man for Big Joe Lombard. He had me that day laying bets at the track to hike up odds for the horse he had fixed to win the fifth. I'd decided the night before that if the odds got rich enough I'd use that race as my ticket out of town, and when they hit forty to one, that was it. I'd held back two grand of what I was supposed to be spreading around, and I used that to sneak a bet on the winner. I knew Big Joe would want me dead for that, but that would be his tough luck. The eighty-grand payoff was going to send me far enough away so I'd never again have to worry about his ugly kisser, as well as leave me flush enough to start something on my own.

All afternoon at the track and I didn't once spot any of Big Joe's muscle so I thought I was home free, but I guess that's just what guys like me always think. After the fifth race finishes, standing sentry duty by the betting windows was Vinnie Paz, maybe the meanest and most vicious of Big Joe's crew; a leg breaker who enjoyed his work way too much. I might've had a chance of convincing Big Joe that I wasn't the one who double-crossed him if I had turned around and disappeared back into the crowd, but I froze trying to think of a way to bribe Paz so he'd let me collect my winnings. This was only for a second, maybe two, and I should've known that there was no way of me doing that—that Paz enjoyed hurting people more than he enjoyed money, so he wasn't about to risk his dream job for any bribe. The instant he spotted me and I saw the way his eyes transformed into what you might see on a rattlesnake, I understood that. The only thing that saved me from being bumped off by Paz then was an old lady with a walker stepping in front of him the split second he was gearing up to run after me, and in his haste he tripped over her. That was what gave me the head start I needed, and I raced out of there to my car like I had rabid dogs hot on my heels, which in a way I did, all the while my pulse pounding like a jackhammer in my temples. I couldn't risk looking behind me. If I did it would've slowed me down enough for Paz to get me. As soon as I got behind the wheel, I shot out of there burning rubber.

The first few miles I drove recklessly to lose Paz or anyone else who might've been following me. Doing stuff like flooring it through red lights and taking hard turns at the last possible moment. When I was sure it was safe, I pulled into a strip mall so I'd have a chance to think. I had to get out of town, but my credit cards were maxed out, and I didn't even have enough cash to fill up the tank. It would be too risky hitting up any so-called friends for loans— Big Joe probably already had the word out and I'd be ratted out in a second. All I could come up with was selling my car—which was little

more than a rusted-out piece of junk—and using the cash for a bus ticket. I wouldn't get more than two hundred for it, but at least it would get me far enough away from Big Joe so I'd be able to breathe easy. So of course after wracking my brains and settling on that plan, I couldn't get the car started up again, the engine making a sick whirring noise.

There was no use sitting there feeling sorry for myself—I couldn't afford to do that, not with Big Joe hunting for my scalp—so I went across the street to a gas station and had them tow over my car. Once they got it fixed, I was going to rob the place. I didn't see that I had any choice since I wouldn't have the money to pay them. After a half-hour of sitting around, the mechanic came over to me, a funny look on his face.

"Someone shot a bullet through your gas tank," he said.

I might've blinked when he told me that, but I can't say for sure. Paz must've used a silencer. I didn't even know he had gotten close enough to fire a shot at me. But I played innocent and said, "No kidding? So how much to fix it?"

He scratched behind an ear. "I'll have to call around and see what a replacement gas tank goes for, but a rough guess, thirteen hundred." He paused, and somewhat dubiously asked, "You want it fixed?"

"The car's not worth anywhere near that."

"Nope, it isn't."

"How about I sell it to you for parts and scrap metal? A hundred?"

His eyes got shifty. He knew he had me over a barrel since it would cost more than a hundred to tow the car somewhere else to sell it. "I can give you fifty," he said.

I took the fifty. What else was I going to do? Since I'd expected to go on the run after the fifth race, I had the title with me, and I signed it over. I also had a packed suitcase in the trunk. I no longer thought of robbing the place. It would've been too risky with my car out of commission. Let's say I boosted one of the other cars there, the odds were it would have a tracking device hidden somewhere in it and I'd be caught by the cops within an hour. Besides, while I was waiting, I'd thumbed through a newspaper that had been left behind and spotted an ad in tiny print for a caretaker job not too far away. That got me thinking it could be a good place to hide out until things cooled off with Big Joe, and when the time was right, a hell of an easy place to rob.

If I'd asked, I'm sure I could've gotten a ride, but I wasn't going to let anyone at that gas station know where I was going. If Paz realized he hit my gas tank, he'd be searching all the nearby garages and gas stations for my car, and he'd soon know whatever the guys in the gas station knew. So I set off on foot with suitcase in hand, and I probably sweated off ten pounds as I walked the two miles to the address given in the newspaper, jumping a bit in my skin at every little noise. I damn near had a heart attack when a car

pulled up next to me, but it was just some guy asking directions.

I got to the address in one piece, and it turned out to be a big Victorian showing some signs of disrepair. Not that the house was falling apart, but paint was peeling, a couple of shutters hung loose, windows needed to be cleaned, the yard nothing more than dead grass and dirt. I walked up the driveway, which was broken up and had weeds higher than my knees growing from the cracks. From there I cut over to the front door and tried ringing the bell, which didn't work, so I used a badly tarnished brass knocker instead.

When the door was opened, it was by a large black woman of maybe fifty who first scowled at the suitcase I was holding and then set the scowl on me.

"What you here for?" she demanded in a heavy Haitian accent.

"The caretaker position advertised in the paper. It's not filled, is it?"

She gave me this look that could only be interpreted as "Thank Jesus no," which was a lucky break for her. No matter what, I had decided I was going to use that house as a hideout, even if it meant stacking bodies in the basement.

"The job's still open," she said. "I'm here temporary." Another *Thank Jesus* type look flashed on her face. "You got any experience?"

"Would I've brought my suitcase if I didn't?"

She didn't question me further on that, and instead turned and told me she'd have me meet the old man, mumbling a word in front of "old" that sounded like it could've been *crazy,* but I wasn't sure.

The hallway we walked down was poorly lit, and the air inside smelled stale. Not dirty, but still not too pleasant. The furniture was all old and dull, but looked like it must've cost some dough when it was first bought. She led me into the kitchen, where the old man was eating beef stew that had been heated up from a can. I would learn later that he had a basement stocked with several years' supply of canned food and boxes of cereal and crackers. Not one thing fresh in the house. Even the milk he used for his cereal and coffee came from cans of evaporated milk.

The old man stared at me, his expression turning sour. "What's he here for?" he asked suspiciously.

"The caretaker position you advertised for," the Haitian woman said.

"You fool. He's here to rob me. I bet that suitcase is empty!"

As I said, I was going to do things the hard way if needed, but I preferred not to have to, so I put the suitcase on the table and opened it to show him that it was filled with clothes.

The old man sniffed in an injured sort of way as he peered into the suitcase, his manner growing increasingly sullen. "I still don't want him," he stated.

The Haitian woman ignored him and told me what my duties would be

outside of the obvious ones. "He thinks he's a ladies' man," she said with disdain."He wants to be groomed every day like he's got a hot date, so you need to shave him, clip his nose and ear hairs, and scrub him pink in the tub. Every day. You can work out your salary requirements with him."

"Are you deaf?" the old man croaked out angrily. "I said I don't want him!"

She faced him, hands on hips, a hotness in her eyes. "I told you I was here only temporary until you find someone full-time. I've had enough of you! And you better mail me what you owe me!"

She turned then and stormed out of the room. She couldn't have been sleeping in the house 'cause she didn't bother collecting any clothes or belongings; instead, seconds later the house rattled from her slamming the front door.

"Who needs her," the old man muttered under his breath, then he eyed me cautiously. "I got a daughter who lives nearby," he said. "She checks up on me all the time. You try something and she'll know it."

"I'm just here to do the job you advertised for."

He made a face as if he didn't believe me, but he still went about negotiating a price with me. He quickly got cagey and insisted on a two-month trial where if things didn't work out he wouldn't owe me a cent. I didn't care. I knew he was lying about having a daughter checking up on him. It didn't matter. Even if there was no daughter in the picture, he still might have someone who came by occasionally to check on him—maybe someone from social services or a local elder-affairs office. Because of that I would play along and do my job as caretaker. I had to, since I was planning to be there for a month, if not longer—and not just so I could hide out from Big Joe. It was so I could find where he had his money stashed. I knew he had a lot of it stashed somewhere. I knew it because I knew the guy was a swindler. I can always recognize a fellow member of the guild.

I was proved right early on when I found two grand hidden in a hollowedout Bible. That's an old swindler's trick—keeping easy-to-grab money hidden about in case you need to take a quick powder. Without much sweat I found another six grand scattered around in false bottoms of drawers and places like that. I left all of the money where I found it—I'd be grabbing it when the time was right, but I knew he'd got a significant stash hidden someplace where it would take a serious effort to get to it, and that was the money I wanted.

Four days ago I learned I underestimated the old man. That was when I found newspaper clippings from fifty-five years ago. These were hidden in the crawlspace of the attic and were about a kid from a rich family who was snatched, which all but told me the man who changed his name to Lorne Green was more than simply a swindler. Instead he started off as a kidnapper. None of the clippings mentioned how much money was paid out, or whether the kid was ever returned. But I knew Green must've gotten a

bundle from that job. He would've been around twenty-five then, and I doubted any of the ransom still remained, but I knew he must've done other jobs. Somewhere in this house was a pot of gold waiting for me to find it.

I pull up a floorboard in the back of the old man's closet, and that's where I find the jewelry. There's not just jewelry. Under each piece—and there's got to be at least thirty of them—there's a photo of a woman. In some cases they're Polaroids, in other cases they're wallet shots. Some of them show the woman posing with a big smile, in others the subject doesn't look too happy. Three of the Polaroid shots, the girls alike enough they had to be sisters, and it makes me think of his Kansas City story.

This is the old man's trophy case—he must've stolen items from each of these women as a keepsake. I'm sure he must've robbed them too. As I look over the jewelry there's one piece that's trying hard to get my attention. A diamond ring that keeps winking at me.

I pick it up for closer inspection, then take it to the window so I can see it under some sunlight. I'm no expert, but I'm no amateur either, and I'm guessing the ring's around three carats, and it looks flawless to me. This could be worth some serious dough. Maybe twenty grand, maybe a lot more. I start feeling antsy thinking there's a chance it might be glass. I pocket it and start down the stairs. When I hit the first floor, I can hear the old man snoring away in the kitchen. I continue on down to the basement where there's a tool chest. I wrap the diamond ring in a rag, and then whack it as hard as I can with a hammer. It's not glass. There's not a scratch on it. It might be cubic zirconia, but I don't think so. I'm pretty sure it's the genuine article. My palms start itching. I decide I've been hiding out long enough. Hard to believe Big Joe would still be scouring the city for me, so it's time for me to collect my payday and scram. The eight grand I found, this diamond, the other jewelry—it will add up to a nice piece of change, but I want much more. I'm either going to make the old man tell me where he's got his stash hidden, or I'll start pulling down walls until I find it.

I jostle the old man awake. At first he's still groggy from being drugged, his eyes glassy as they crack open. But when he spots the diamond ring and the eight grand sitting on the table out of arm's reach, he straightens up, his eyes clearing quickly.

"I knew you were only a cheap thief," he croaks out as he glares at me with contempt.

I don't bother arguing with him. What's the point? Besides, he's mostly right. I don't kid myself otherwise, but the cheap part will be changing once I get my hands on his hidden fortune.

"This is either going to go easy for you or hard," I say. "The easy way is, you tell me where you got your money hidden, then I lock you up in the food

pantry and call the cops after I get out of the country. The hard way is, I start beating you till you either talk or you drop dead. And if you drop dead before you talk, I'll tear the walls down and dig up the floors if I have to to find where you have it hidden."

He lowers his eyes from mine and he sniffs in the direction of the eight grand sitting on the table.

"You already found it," he says, his tone injured.

"That's only your emergency fund. I want what you got from a lifetime of kidnapping eleven-year-old boys, and cheating and robbing women."

He looks toward some faraway place, his face a blank mask. "Go to hell," he mutters in a raspy croak.

I sigh loud enough so he can hear how put upon I am that he's going to make me beat him. I first wheel him away from the table, then I reach down so I can pull him from his chair and dump him onto the floor, but he moves with surprising speed, his right fist a whirl as he clocks me on the jaw. The blow causes me to stagger back a couple of steps, and I watch with stunned surprise as he bolts from the chair and races out of the room.

I snap out of it quick enough. The punch leaves my jaw throbbing, but he didn't break anything, and I find myself grinning over how he faked me out for weeks making me think he's an invalid. I hear him rummaging about in the room set up as a den, and I move quickly to chase after him, thinking he's going to be on the phone calling the cops. But he's not worrying about the phone. Instead he's thrown books off a built-in bookcase and slid a panel off to a cache of some sort. When I see what he's pulled out of the cache, I charge him, the adrenaline pumping hard in me, and I hit him with a tackle, knocking him to the floor. The two of us struggle over the gun that he's taken from the wall. Both of us are clawing at each other as we roll around, and it's a tougher fight than I would've thought. Even at eighty he's a powerful man, and for a moment I think I'm going to die, but I get the gun barrel tilted enough so when the trigger's pulled the bullet strikes him under his chin. His body sags and I know he's dead even before I see the mess that was made when the bullet exited his skull.

I'm shaky as I get to my feet. I never killed anyone before. Thirty-eight days ago I was just a bag man and a low-level chiseler, but because I had to outsmart myself over a fixed race I'm now something very different.

I don't know how loud the shot was. To me it sounded like a bomb exploding, but maybe that was just the way it was to me. Maybe the old man's body muffled the sound. Maybe none of the neighbors heard it. I look down and see my shirt's splattered with blood, and I understand immediately why my face feels sticky. No matter what, I have to clean myself off and change into clean clothes. If the cops come, there's nothing I can do about it. But I know I don't have time anymore to tear apart the house. I take a look in the hole in the wall Green had exposed. There's more newspaper

clippings, a passport, nothing else.

While I'm washing the blood off me and then changing into new clothes, I have an idea what I need to do. No more than five minutes and I'm back downstairs, bringing my suitcase with me filled with the rest of my clothes, including the ones made bloody by the shooting. I leave the suitcase in the kitchen, add to my wallet a thousand from the eight grand, and put the rest of the money in a bag holding Green's stolen jewelry. I put the diamond ring in my pocket. After I turn the gas on in the oven, I leave the kitchen.

After I move to the den, I wipe off any prints from the gun, take hold of Green's corpse by his ankles, and drag him back to the kitchen. I use a trash can to start a fire and feed it with enough old newspaper to keep it burning. I think about those newspaper clippings that Green had kept with the gun, and I almost go back for them since I'm curious what they're about, but instead I leave the house through the back door, mostly because I don't know how much time I've got with the gas from the oven filling up the kitchen.

It turns out I didn't have much at all. I cut across the backyard and I'm stepping onto the street running behind Green's when the explosion happens. I turn around to see the flames, and then I'm running to get as far away from there as I can.

An hour later I'm at the bus depot with a ticket in hand that will take me to Cleveland. I have no interest in going there, but it's the first bus out of town and it's boarding in fifteen minutes. The minutes ticking off are torture. I'm keeping my face hidden behind a newspaper, but I can't stop worrying about Big Joe's being tipped off that I'm here. I know I'm just being paranoid—that it's only nerves—but I can't shake the feeling. When the announcement's made that the bus is boarding in five minutes, I look up from the newspaper in time to catch Paz through the plate-glass window, and he's moving with determination. I wasn't just being paranoid before. Big Joe must've paid someone here at the bus depot to be looking for me.

If I try running, Paz will shoot me down like a dog, so I do what he's not expecting me to do, which is fight back. I grab a lady's suitcase, and I move just as fast to the door as Paz is, and I hit him with the suitcase just as he's stepping through it. Then the two of us are on the floor grappling—me trying to keep him from pointing his gun at me, him trying to blow my head off.

I'm gasping in air as we wrestle. I'm able to slam his gun hand down hard enough to make him drop it, and I get the sense that the gun has scattered out of reach. It doesn't stop him from getting the upper hand and rolling onto my chest, his hands reaching for my throat, then squeezing it. I guess if he can't shoot me, he's going to choke me to death. I'm bucking and fighting, trying not to black out, but it seems hopeless. My lungs feel like they're bursting and my vision's blurring. But then things suddenly change,

with him slumping over me. As blurry as my vision is, I can see the cops dragging Paz off me. Then two of them are pulling me to my feet, and being kind of rough about it.

The cops take me to the station and dump me in a small interrogation room. I decide I'm going to mostly tell the truth—that Big Joe has a grudge against me and sent Paz to kill me. I'll lie about what the grudge is about—maybe tell them that I slept with Big Joe's daughter and he found out about it. Let them prove otherwise. In the end they'll let me go. They'll be curious about the diamond ring and the almost thousand in my wallet, but they won't be able to prove it's not mine, and in all the confusion the bag I had with the rest of the dough and the jewelry was left in the depot. By now someone slick must've picked it up and left town with it. So the cops have nothing to hold me on. Still, I'm surprised by how long they're keeping me waiting in this room. It must be hours by now.

When a cop who introduces himself as Detective Mark Foley finally comes to see me, I feign outrage, saying, "Vincent Paz was going to the bus depot to kill me. I was only defending myself. You have no right sticking me in this room and forgetting about me like you did."

He doesn't answer me. He just sits across from me and places the diamond ring on the table in front of him.

"If you want me to, I'll tell you why Vincent Paz was sent to kill me—"

He interrupts me, telling me he doesn't care about Vincent Paz. "What I want you to tell me is where you got this ring," he says. Something about his voice chills me.

"My dear old mom's. The only thing she left me when she died."

He smiles at that. "What was your mom's name?"

"Why?"

He shrugs. "I want to check her initials with what's engraved on the inside of the ring. I'm curious why her last name must be different from yours. So how about you tell me her name?"

I acted like an amateur never checking whether the ring was engraved. I say, "My pop bought the ring secondhand before he gave it to my mom. So what. It's the thought that counts, right?"

He doesn't challenge me about this. Instead he takes a photo from a folder and places it in front of me. I recognize the woman in the photo, and before I'm able to control my expression, he sees that I recognize her. It's the woman in the snapshot Green had the diamond ring sitting on top of, except the photo the cop shows me is a morgue shot. I start getting a sick feeling in my gut, but what I'm thinking doesn't seem possible.

"Do you know her?"

I shake my head.

"It's funny that you don't know her since you had her ring."

I don't say anything. I can't.

"Where were you August eighth at one A.M.?"

August eighth was three weeks ago. That sick feeling is only getting worse. I already know what the answer is going to be, but I can't stop myself from asking him, "Why?"

"Because that's when you beat her to death and left her body in a vacant lot on the corner of Washington and Pine."

I had passed that same vacant lot when I went to the old man's house to answer his caretaker ad. It's three blocks from Green's house. I'm stunned at how badly I had misjudged him. When I found the jewelry and photos, I thought they were trophies he had taken years ago from women he seduced and robbed. But that wasn't it. They were trophies all right, but they were trophies taken by a serial killer. Green must've murdered all those women. Even three weeks ago, when I thought he was lying in bed an invalid, he was sneaking out of the house and killing another woman. My head's swimming thinking how he had me groom him so he'd look his best when he killed the women.

Foley is waiting patiently for me to answer him, but what am I going to say? I can't tell him about Green, not after shooting him and burning down his house, and I have no alibi and no way of setting one up. I can't think of a single person who would vouch for me, not with Big Joe wanting my scalp. I realize it's as simple as my luck's run out, so I don't say another word. Not then, and not when I'm being booked. Maybe after I'm found guilty of murder and am sentenced I'll think of something to say, but even then I don't think I'll be able to.

# VOICES IN THE CISTERN

***by William Burton McCormick*** | 5138 words

**William Burton McCormick's fiction has appeared in *EQMM, AHMM,* and elsewhere. A four-time Derringer Award finalist for his short stories, he is also a novelist whose historical work set in the Baltic States, *Lenin's Harem,* was published in both English and Latvian and became the first work of fiction ever added to the permanent library at the Latvian War Museum. His first *EQMM* story, the Derringernominated "Pompo's Disguise," starred ancient Roman thief Quintus the Clever, who appears again here.**

**A.D. 50**

Cicero, the great Roman orator and master of Latin prose, famously wrote that even hardened thieves have traces of honor buried deep in their natures. That every rogue lives by a system of ethics, though it may be scant and unfathomable to civilized men. That no soul is wholly black.

But Cicero never met Vibius Vitellius Pansa. A twilight hour with him and the ole patrician statesman would have been running for his life, his philosophy changed forever. Certainly, I should be running now. People don't live long around Vibius. Two of my company have already met their ends by his sword, leaving me the only expatriate thief left in this frontier town. By Mercury, god of thieves and travelers, I *will* live to return to Rome.

But I won't be leaving today. This town is surrounded. And so am I. Vibius has me penned near the back of the tavern, his heavy, muscular body eclipsing the light from the opened doorway behind him, the table we sit at turned to box me into the corner. No escape.

He says, "Listen," so I listen. What choice do I have?

"Do you remember," he whispers in that lispy voice of his, "what you told me on the Vinalia holiday, Quintus? The night we got drunk in this very tavern?"

There is menace in his tone, the usual evil in his dark eyes, and my mind reflexively tries to recall what foolish thing I might have said during that celebratory night. Did I admit to sleeping with his Sophia? Or slipping *denarii* out of Vibius's coin purse while he lay passed out on the floor? Or was it

something about his "dealings"? Did I grumble aloud that I felt it treason for Vibius to smuggle Roman steel to the Scythians with the war going on, that it would end in crucifixion for all of us? Who knows? I'm a fool when drinking wine. It's cost me wives, friends, even a prize horse or two. Yet I couldn't have voiced such suicidal ideas. Not to Vibius and still be breathing....

"Quintus," he says, clearly tired of my delay. "You told me you were an excellent swimmer."

"A swimmer?" I repeat, relieved and a little confused.

"A diver for pearls in your youth."

"Yes. At Myus Hormus for a few years." Actually, only one stormy season, and I'd spent more time stealing from others than diving. But why tell Vibius that? Let's see where this is going.

"They used to call me the 'King Crab,' Vibius, 'cause I could split open oyster shells so naturally." I click my teeth trying to imitate the sound of a cracking shell. It's a pathetic charade. "Why do you care about my diving?"

"I want you to salvage something from a lake, 'Crab.'"

Well, this is interesting. Our city, Chersonesus, has been under siege for sixteen days from the long-haired Scythians, the whole town isolated on a tiny peninsula jutting out into the Black Sea. There isn't a body of fresh water in held territory. So, Vibius's "lake" is either really the sea, or he means we must go over the wall into Scythian lands. An act of suicide. Even blessed Mercury wouldn't help us there.

But I'll play along. "Which lake?"

"Never mind," he barks. "When you agree, we'll talk location."

"What are we looking to recover?"

His voice lowers, though there's no one to hear him. The tavern is deserted, merrymaking long ago a casualty of siege rationing. "Quintus... you remember Appius Domitius Nepos?"

"Soldier from Herculaneum?"

"He's dead. I killed him."

Surprise, surprise. As a professional, I should let this go. Unfortunately, divine Fabulinus taught me too well to speak.

"Why?" I ask.

"Many reasons. Nepos was stealing from my money pouch."

"Oh?"

"And he may have bedded Sophia."

"The cad."

"But the chief reason was profit, Quintus." His voice lowers further. "Nepos possessed an amulet fashioned in sapphires and gold, one he'd found during the looting after the Mauretanian Revolt. Kept it hidden from his betters for ten years, he did. Nepos showed it to me once as collateral in a deal he and I were concocting. Said it could fetch ten thousand *aurei* in Rome or Alexandria."

"Ten thousand!"

"Ten thousand, Quintus. He was a fool to reveal such a treasure to a man like me." Vibius smiles, a pride in his greed. "So, I lured him to this lake..."

"I still don't understand why a lake?"

"Let it be. We'll simply say I convinced Nepos to paddle his *ratiara* out into friendly waters. A place he couldn't run from me," he whispers, drawing his sword from his sheath and raising it high above the table.

I lean back on my bench. By Orcus, he is Mors unleashed.

"When the time came, Quintus, I stabbed Nepos in the throat with my *gladius,* a powerful thrust that made him spit blood, then a second blow up against his skull right here." Vibius digs the sword point into his own scalp, pushing so hard even he winces as a trickle of blood runs down his forehead. "Nepos was dead the instant I cut him. His knees buckled at the force of the blows, his eyes clouded. I saw the amulet around his neck then, Quintus. I nearly grasped it—ten thousand *aurei* almost in my hands—but he fell too quickly away, out of the boat into the water."

A tremor runs through his body at these words, regret birthing a sickly swoon in my compatriot. It takes a long moment for Vibius to regain his senses. At last he says: "Nepos must have been wary of me, Quintus. He wore a *lorica* underneath his robes. The body sunk, carried straight down by the steel armor to the bottom. Out of reach."

"Why didn't you go after it?"

"I can't swim. But you can, Quintus. A quarter-share if you bring up that Mauretanian amulet."

Well, well... "I want half."

Something out of Hades flickers in those eyes, but his answer is immediate. "If you need it, then all right. There'll be enough to go around."

Victory scares me. Vibius doesn't give up money easily.

"Meet me at the Temple of Apollo Medicus tonight, 'King Crab.' We'll be rich men by morning."

Rich by morning? A jest worthy of Bacchus himself. It's long past the third watch, and we're not one *quadran* richer. Instead, I wait for Vibius, pacing over the loose stones on the edge of the Apollonian Plaza. It is a hot, sticky night, and despite the war's curfew, I am far from alone. Dying bodies cover these hallowed grounds. Injured townsfolk lay strewn across the temple's steps, a dozen others resting against the heavy Doric columns above, even more huddle around the dry fountain at the center. They are gamblers, betting their final hours that Apollo will appear in his *Medicus* form, as the great physician and bringer of medicine. A sad fantasy. Though the priests deny this, it is well known the Scythians are a more pious people than we Romans. If the gods intercede at all, it will be on the enemy's side.

We are on our own.

I spit out a few of the salted sesame seeds I've been chewing and continue my walk around the plaza, my circuitous path allowing me to observe the crowd from every angle. The horrors within are plentiful. Among the dying are children injured at the last assault, when the Scythians stormed the walls and roamed free inside the city for half a day. With so few soldiers remaining since the *legatus* sailed for Rome with his legions, the people of Chersonesus stood alone to beat back their enemy. Women, slaves, the youth of the city all fell in the defense. Me? I lay drunk during the heroism, blacked out under a table, cradling a wench whose name I can't even recall.

I've no regrets. I'm a bandit with allegiance to no one. But to see the results here, the raw, open wounds in mere babes... Well... I'm no Celsus, no student of legendary Hippocrates. I know nothing of the medical arts. What can be done?

A sigh, something cold slithering down deep in my soul. My guardian *genius* haunts me, taunts me. I ignore him. After all, a conscience is a terrible liability in a thief. Great Mercury seize it, strangle it, take my morals from me. I beseech you, wing-footed one, listen to my prayers at last....

Dark glances in my direction interrupt these tired old pleas. Walking among the temple-goers, three guards keep order, one of them eyeing me suspiciously as I tarry too long on the plaza's edge. In a community this small, I've earned a reputation. It would be wise to slip out of the light into night's darkness, let them forget about foul Quintus, hooligan from Rome...

Oh, but where is Vibius?

"Quintus," whispers a lispy voice.

I turn my attention to the narrowest, darkest side street off the plaza. In the shadows, far from the entrance, stands the hulking form of Vibius. He motions for me to join him and I follow my compatriot deeper into the alley. Soon we are far from the temple district, slinking wordlessly along the twisted streets set down by our Greek predecessors, keeping off the newer, wider Roman avenues. At last we arrive in Chersonesus's oldest neighborhood, so close to the eastern edge of the city I can see the torch flames of the sentries stationed on the outer wall. Perhaps Vibius *does* intend to take us into Scythian lands? I slow my steps, drop away from him...

One word about going over the wall, friend, and I run. We can't spend ten thousand *aurei* on the deathly shores of Elysium.

But my fears prove unfounded. Vibius stops at a two-story *insula* apartment and, producing a bronze key from the folds of his tunic, ushers me inside. Another key and another door and we are standing in the darkened apartment of a lower-class Roman family. A horrid and familiar stench fills the room.

Even in the darkness I know. "How long have they been dead?"

"Less than three days," smirks Vibius in a singsong voice. "Casualties of the Scythian attack. Still, what the Fates take from others is a boon to us, you know?"

He lights a candle. I see the family. I wish I hadn't.

The wounds are too clear.

"Since when do the Scythians use short swords, Vibius?"

"Since I sold them short swords," he grunts, eyes narrowing behind that candle. "Questions are unhealthy in our profession, Quintus."

"It seems so."

"Nepos asked questions too."

"And where is Nepos exactly?"

"There." He points to a large black object in the rear of the room. In the gloom of a single candlelit chamber, with my attention on the deceased tenants, I had failed to notice it before now. A small, two-man boat rests on its side against the far wall.

"You expect to take that over the wall? Unseen by friend or enemy?"

He mutters something about me being slow-witted, then pries the boat from the wall to reveal a large hole chiseled away in the mud brick behind. The candle flame flutters in an incoming breeze, hinting at a deep passage beyond.

Well, what is this? A passage to Tartarus? My *genius* rises again.

Ten thousand *aurei,* Quintus. Ten thousand.

At Vibius's order we rotate the boat and press it bow-first through the hole. It just fits, clearing the craggy break-in by the narrowest of margins. Then I follow Vibius inside, crawling through dust and over broken bricks, wondering at the bargain I've made with this traitorous son of Ephesus.

We squeeze into a thin passage, our bodies pressed to the walls by the bulk of the boat. The candlelight dancing in the draft, the flame remains just strong enough to illuminate. And it is truly revealing. The masonry in this tunnel is superior to the crude apartment we have left, much of it fashioned in solid Roman concrete, and the walls are decorated with familiar Neptunian frescoes. I finally grasp our situation. In the twisty backstreets of the old Greek neighborhoods, Vibius had lead us to an apartment adjoining the great Cistern of Chersonesus. We have tunneled into the city's water supply.

So, this is Vibius's "lake."

He gives me no time to consider these circumstances, barking out orders to lift the boat and carry it onwards. It is a snug fit, the hull scraping paint from the frescoed walls as we progress and every few steps we must shift our positions, rotating the boat to find some new impossible angle to wedge it through. At last, we descend a series of wide steps, the passage opening into a chamber beyond our candle's ability to illuminate. There is great depth to the darkness, a feeling that the unseen somehow extends forever.

We set the boat down on wide tiles inscribed with Greek characters. From

a pile of bricks nearby, Vibius produces a large tar-headed torch, lighting it with the candle flame.

Even jaded as I am, it is a magnificent scene that materializes before us, a vision out of the days of Homer and Hesiod, when men like Diomedes were strong enough to fight the gods. We are standing on a stone platform jutting out into the city's great cistern, greenish waters extending as far as the torchlight can reach. The air is as fresh as the open sea, with a slightly copper smell to it, and from the surface of this man-made lake rises a forest of greengray Ionic columns, easily thirty feet in height above the waters, reaching up to the great vaults that form the Atlantean ceiling, a golden rooftop suspending the weight of the city above us.

"Enough fresh water to support the population ten months in times of drought," says Vibius as he slides the boat into the silent waters. "Or under siege."

"Why did you bring Nepos down here?"

"To kill him, of course," he says bluntly. "And get the amulet."

"I mean how did you convince him to come?"

He shrugs. "This is the most private place in Chersonesus at night, Quintus. We often do deals down here. I told Nepos we had an offer for his amulet, said the buyer was waiting on another landing, all we had to do was ferry across..."

"Rather like Charon."

"The dead's ferryman earns a single coin for his services, Quintus. I'm after ten thousand *aurei."* He picks up a wide plank from the refuse on the landing, tosses it into the boat. "Let's go."

Vibius hands me the torch and we descend into the boat. He casts us off with a grunt, then uses the plank to paddle our boat away from the platform, through the gloom, into the heart of the cistern.

We cross in silence, me kneeling in the bow with the torch, Vibius behind, steering us through. The columns are endless, like massive trees in the Pontine swamps southeast of Rome. As we pass close to one pillar, its girth half the width of our boat, I reach out and touch its coarse skin, disturbing the white mineral lines marking high water of years past.

I marvel at the columns' age. By their inscriptions, these predate the Roman settlement, the sections stolen from Greek temples on the surface and reassembled down here with little care for harmony or aesthetic. Fluting is mismatched, capital pieces rest stacked on their sides or even upside down. All is functional in design, not meant for human eyes.

And yet, as we pass, I see new landings in the distance, each with their own staircase entrance. There must be a half-dozen official openings descending from the surface. And how many clandestine ones made by men like Vibius? I remind myself, despite the magnificence of the scene, that we sail on Nepos's grave.

"There she is," shouts Vibius, with clear satisfaction. He slows his paddling, nods ahead. "The column with the Gorgon head, Quintus. Nepos, the old scoundrel, went in there, fell against the pillar as he sank."

We drift up to a particularly damaged-looking column with deep cracks in its higher sections, and a mosaic of crusted gold-green minerals over the lower. High up in the gloom, an enormous Medusa-head capital stares down upon us disapprovingly.

"If she turns you to stone, you'll reach the bottom quicker, Quintus," chuckles Vibius with what, from him, passes for humor. "Might have a hard time getting you back up, though."

I stand up in the boat, touch the ancient pillar. "You're certain this is the right one?"

"One hundred sixteen columns in here, Quintus. With twenty or so Gorgon capitals, all upside down. Except that one." He laughs. "Someone erred in the construction, it seems, since the city planners forbid Medusa to be set rightside-up. Thought it bad luck. Certainly was for Nepos."

The mirth drains from his voice. "And unlucky for me too, as I didn't get the amulet. Let's get to work, 'Crab.' No currents in the cistern, and with that heavy *lorica,* the body's got to be near the base somewhere."

I hand Vibius the torch, remove my sandals, belt, and tunic, and, fully nude, move to the edge of the boat.

Diving for the dead. The gods must not approve.

A last glance at Vibius—expectant, impatient, smoldering greed in his black eyes. Great Mercury, vengeful Dirae, if I perish down here, drown this Ephesian rat in waters a thousand times deeper than this cistern. Leave his ghost to wander the floor of Oceanus cold and alone for all eternity.

With such a prayer to the gods— *any gods* who'll listen—I jump into the cool waters, surfacing again to fill my lungs once more, then diving down as I did all those years ago at Myus Hormus on the Red Sea. I descend headfirst, kicking quickly to build inertia, then slowing the pace to conserve air. Vibius's torchlight does not reach far below the surface, all is quickly black, and I keep a guiding hand on the mineral-laden pillar as I swim down, feeling the column's girth expand as I move towards the base. The depth of the waters is surprising, my body soon straining under the effects of pressure, a tightening pain building in my ears and temples. I grip my nose, blow into my sinuses to balance the air. The headache subsides.

Yet it takes too long to descend and I have little air as I reach the bottom. Like some half-blind hermit crab, I grope over the silky floor tiles, extending my hands in arching motions out from the column base. Nothing.

By Mercury, if this is the wrong column....

I blow out a few bubbles, feeding the body's need to exhale. A cold, coppery taste comes with it. My lungs aren't what they once were, my heartbeat rising steadily. I resolve to swim around the pillar base once before

surfacing. With one hand on the column and the other dragging along the bottom, I kick through inky blackness. Three-quarters around, I touch something coarse and leathery, the shape familiar. A boot! My pulse races at the discovery, eating up the last of my air. The boot adjoins a leg, up then to a host of floating robes rising off a body.

Nepos lies facedown, forty feet below the surface.

I move my hands up to the torso, feel the steel bands of the *lorica* beneath his tunic. If I can just find the shoulders, the neck opening...

A sticky contracting pain through my lungs, my pulse thundering in my ears... no... not this time. Rise now, or I'll never reach the surface.

I push off the floor, a flurry of kicks propelling me upwards. Halfway up my aged lungs fail as my body forces an exhale, bubbles erupting from my mouth, choking waters rushing in. But I keep my will, remembering my diving days. Rise, rise, no matter what...

I gasp as I break the surface, a painful, roaring breath worthy of Ulysses ascending from the sea at Scheria. Black spots bursting over my vision, I reach out, cling to the column, keep my limp body from slipping back into the abyss.

As my sight dissolves into blackness, I catch one image. A glimpse of truth sent by Minerva herself. Vibius leans over the opposite side of the boat, his back to me. His muscles coiled, he holds the searching torch out over the waters with one hand, his sword in the other, high and ready.

Then the blindness overcomes me. It takes several long breaths, gripping that column, refilling my lungs, for my sight to clear. When vision returns Vibius is facing me in the boat, his weapon sheathed as if never drawn.

"Well, Quintus? Did you find him? Did you get it?"

"No," I say, still panting, "it's too deep. Perhaps when the waters lower..."

His face contorts at this news. "Lower?"

"With the siege Chersonesus has no other source of water. The levels will drop quickly. In a few days, with Mercury's blessing, we can try again."

He trembles with such rage that the boat rocks beneath him. "And does Mercury think me a fool as you do? You'll be down here to fetch the amulet for yourself the moment I turn my back." He draws his *gladius,* slicing the air between us . "If you wish to see the sun again, Quintus, you'll get that treasure now."

I slide around the column, away from the boat. "Kill me and who'll dive for you, Vibius?"

"Better to find another swimmer than to trust Quintus the Liar with such a valuable secret. Go on. Dive! Your life depends on it."

Tip the boat over, drown him... Do it, Quintus... please.

Later.

"All right, all right, friend. By Jupiter, I'll give it one more attempt."

With Vibius watching me, I take another lungful of coppery air and

descend again. My limbs are weaker this time, a powerful ache running throughout my body. But I know the course now. Nepos will welcome a final visitor.

Then we let him sleep forever. It is only fair.

Soon I am at the bottom once more, floating in the darkness above the corpse as my hands slide over Nepos's shoulders to the opened collar. My fingers numb at this depth, it takes too many heartbeats to find the cold chain cutting through the death-bloated neck flesh. When at last I touch these twisted links, they run down to the chest, the amulet itself pinned below the body.

By Mercury, why is nothing easy? The corpse won't budge. Nepos is a huge man, half-titan he seems, and weighted down by the steel *lorica* under his robes, he's too much to pry off the bottom. The air already dwindling in my lungs, I lower my feet to the cistern's floor, trying to find the leverage. *Think of the riches, Quintus! Lift! Pull!* My back arches, my posture leaning farther and farther away until I'm looking directly upwards as I strain. The yellow orb of Vibius's torchlight shines far above, like a full moon high in a cloudy night sky, his boat a swaying silhouette at the luminosity's edge.

But why is it swaying?

The answer is immediate. The tides of another craft rock the little boat, the swaying growing stronger as a great black square with six oars in the water glides into view. A moment later this craft—it seems a large raft—gently bumps against our boat in an almost peaceful motion. Then Vibius's corpse plunges into the cistern above me, crimson clouds billowing out from his opened neck, wings of white foam forming in his death twitches!

I instinctively gasp, a flood of bubbles rising from my mouth to mix with the dead man's blood. Panicked, I release Nepos's body, clumsily, desperately swimming away over the cistern floor.

For mindless moments, I kick through the depths, heart pounding, unable to judge distance or depth. It is all I can do to make the next column. Half blacking out, I rise behind the pillar and try to muffle my gasps as I break the surface.

Scythian voices answer back. Can they hear me? How far am I from them? It is several long moments, willing my painful breaths to slow, waiting for the depth blindness to pass, before I dare to peer around that column.

I am farther than anticipated, not one or two, but three pillars away. Burning torches held in the hands of the enemy illuminate the scene. Against our little boat floats a fir-tree raft, at least a dozen helmed Scythians standing upon it. Several hold torches, others languish at the oars. One, he appears the captain, stands in our boat, his short sword drawn, poking at Vibius's unmoving corpse in the water. With guttural call, he seems satisfied that Vibius is dead and returns to his raft. The oarsmen resume rowing. At the back several muscular men use cattle scapulae to scoop a yellowish

powder from high clay jars, dumping the mixture into the trailing waters. Even at this distance I can see an occasional uncrushed leaf among the grains. Deadly hellebore...

Poison. They are fouling the city's water.

More torchlights. In the distance, beyond this raft, move two others. And a new set of lights on my side of the column, sailing towards me...

I sink down below the surface, deep enough, I hope, to be invisible.

But I can't remain here long. Fortuna, goddess of luck, protect me, for there is a single choice. The closest exit, the one I know must be open, is reached only one way. I push off the column praying to remain unseen as I glide beneath the approaching raft. Ten, maybe fifteen feet below the surface I silently swim.

Please, fickle Fortuna, don't let them be looking down....

With a few slow, silent kicks, my body passes within their torchlight, yellowish beams painting my naked skin shades of orange. Then the dread clouds of hellebore descend as I reach the rear of their raft. I close my eyes, lock tight my lips. Not one sip, not a drop must reach my tongue. I feel the tickling texture of the deadly powder all around me, the grains collecting on my face and shoulders as I swim through the hellebore clouds. Finally their powdery touch fades. I refuse to slow, won't rise until my lungs are spent. When I do break the surface at last, I open my eyes, risk a glance backwards. The Scythian raft has long passed me, gliding over to join the others near the Medusa column.The enemy voices remain low and calm.

Fortuna, sweetest of goddesses, I'll sacrifice a goat to you every morning. Just let me survive.

The time for stealth over, I plunge ahead, swimming as fast as I can over the surface, churning the water towards the nearest landing, the one from which Vibius and I cast off so recently. The instant I touch those old Greek stones, I pull myself from the cistern waters, sprinting through the darkness to the stairs. Scythian shouts rise far behind me. I imagine their bowmen taking aim at my nude body, their unerring arrows piercing my neck and back. I drive this image from my mind, hurling myself up the steps in a blind ascension, scraping my bared skin against the walls, finally tripping and falling like the old Fool in a Plautine comedy. But I won't be caught. I continue my feverish climb and soon that familiar stench of death is near. My groping hands find the chiseled hole into the apartment. I scamper through, hesitating just long enough to seize a tunic. I don it with a prayer to the deceased, and rush out into the dark streets.

Safe on the surface, I slow outside the *insula,* catch my breath. Take a moment to realize I live, that I've escaped Pluto's realm once more. How many gods will I thank in their temples tomorrow? A fortune in sacrifices to make...

Yes, a fortune... but divine offerings are premature. Riches remain at

stake. What shall be your next move, Quintus?... Think... think.... Where is my *genius* now? Where is the inspiration?

I glance at the sealed door of the apartment, imagine the path down to the waters. The Scythians will be gone by dawn, when the cistern is opened to the public. If I wait for tomorrow night I can dive again, undetected by my fellows, and retrieve the amulet for myself. Ten thousand *aurei,* a princeship in my hands.

Your son won't be a pauper much longer, honored Annia. I'll give you a luxurious villa on the shore of Lake Trasimene surrounded by servants... an honest life... like you dreamed for me, dear Mother....

Yet, even this triumph is spoiled. My *genius* awakens, interjecting unwelcome truths into my mind. A dive tomorrow evening will leave a full day for the townspeople to draw from the fouled water. Imbibing on tasteless hellebore, they may think their illness is disease from other sources. Rotting siege food. A plague. Or an act of the cruel gods. So many will drink on these hot days. Hundreds, thousands will die.... Children first....

I double over, fight off this cursed *genius.* If I listen, if I alert the city, they'll drain the cistern, allow the springs to fill it again unpolluted. But before it fills, they'll find Nepos, the amulet....

Mother... what did Cicero say about honor among thieves? No, this is not a fair test, great Mercury... not a fair test at all...

I scream aloud, and feeling dizzy stumble over to an outcropping of stone beneath the city wall. For a brief moment I understand Vibius, why he swooned so when Nepos went in....

I crouch forward on the stone, pondering, cursing for ages it seems. In my convulsions, a weight rubs against my thigh. An irritant felt even among these agonies. I investigate its source. In the pocket of the dead man's tunic is a coin, an old bronze *as.*

A sign.

Can it be? An answer given by Fortuna? Or Mercury? Or a deception? A trickery from the owner's unburied shade? I examine this weathered coin, seeking my way. It is nearly a century old, shaved on the edges and slightly bent, a relic from Republican times still in circulation out here. On one side is a galley filled with supplies bound for a city far from Rome. I trace the engraving with my thumb, feeling its smoothness, a skin worn away by the thousand fingers that have touched it over its life. Merchants, soldiers, gamblers, and thieves. From citizens and priests to slaves and slave-children. Generations leading to me. I feel them all.

It is an honest coin.

I turn over the *as.* On the reverse is the two-faced deity Janus. God of beginnings, endings, and change.

Change. For me. To shed a conscience at last.

"Heads or ships?" The child's game. Ten thousand *aurei* against a

thousand Chersonesian souls.

Yet I'm afraid... more afraid than I ever was of those Scythian brigands.... Invisible Fortuna determining the course of a life... of lives...

I throw the coin a hundred times in my mind before I let it go. It takes all my courage to watch it fly, see it land. The result clear.

A sigh. I throw it again. And again. Janus changes nothing.

And Cicero was an old fool.

*Ignosce mihi, mater.*

"Guards, guards!" I shout at last, rising from my seat and running toward the sentries at the walls. "There are voices in the cistern...."

# A SWIMMER FROM THE DOLPHIN CLUB

***by Jonathan Moore*** | 4592 words

**Bram Stoker Award nominee Jonathan Moore turned to writing thrillers more closely aligned to mystery than horror with January 2016's *The Poison Artist* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), a book that received starred reviews from both *Booklist* and *PW* and has already been sold for translation into five other languages. Another crime thriller from the author, who practices law in Hawaii, is due in early 2017. See *The Dark Room.***

Kennon went back up the hillside and stepped over the low guardrail that marked the pullout's boundary. A pair of eucalyptus trees grew at the edge of the parking area, and already their wet leaves were plastered over his windshield and across the roofs of the patrol cars. He climbed onto the smooth-sawn stump of what should have been a third tree, and then looked back down the hill so he could see the whole scene.

Garcia was on the rocks, standing where they'd found the backpack. Her clothes and shoes had been next to it. A neatly folded stack, her white jogging socks rolled into a ball atop her sports bra and windbreaker. Everything was there, except her panties. He watched Garcia talk with the divers as they put on their gear. The police boat was offshore, three hundred yards out. Officers stood on either side of the bow, watching the slate-gray water. Above them, the Bay Bridge curved across the water and into the fog. Streetlamps were blinking alight along the bridge and in the city's hills. He looked back at the divers and hoped they'd brought good lights.

His phone began to vibrate. He pulled it from its case and looked at the incoming number before he answered it.

"What'd you find?" he asked.

"Her dad," Angela said.

They'd found a Prada wallet in the backpack. Inside it was her driver's license, forty dollars in cash, and two credit cards. Nothing more personal than a few receipts and half a dozen stamp cards from a coffee shop she must have liked. Kennon had texted Angela a photo of the license, and she'd gone to work.

"He's here in town," Angela was saying, "but he hadn't heard from her in a week."

"Is that unusual?"

"Not for them. She calls Sundays, or drops by."

"So he wouldn't have thought anything until tomorrow," Kennon said.

"He gave me more—she was an associate at Nishi Benedicto, and I got her boss on the phone. She came in on Thursday, but not Friday. Didn't answer her cell, didn't respond to e-mails."

There'd been crabs scuttling around the top of her backpack when he and Garcia found it. Crusted bird shit on her folded windbreaker. When they'd gotten here, for all they'd known, her stuff had been there a month. But from what Angela was saying, the window of her disappearance was narrow.

"You get anything else?"

"Her dad," Angela said. "He's got a key to her place. It's his house, and she rents it from him. He'll let us in."

"Tonight?"

"Of course tonight—she's his daughter."

He hung up and looked back down the hill. The divers were in the water now, swimming out on their backs. They held their inflation hoses above their shoulders, releasing air from their vests. Weighted with gear, they sank quickly. For a moment, after they were gone, he could see their lights beneath the surface. Then there was nothing.

"What I don't get," Garcia said, "is, like, who skinny-dips on Yerba Buena Island? And don't forget, it's November."

Kennon didn't answer. He didn't get it either, but that was nothing new to him. He could figure out how people did things. Why they did them always took longer. Garcia steered onto the ramp joining I-80 and the Bay Bridge. Traffic stretched into the city, maybe an accident near the first off-ramps. Garcia changed lanes a couple of times and then resigned himself to it.

In the phone call, the man said he'd found a girl's backpack and clothes on some rocks by the water. It got him worried, he'd said. His message got kicked around the station half the day until the lieutenant heard about it and asked Kennon if he'd like to take a look. Kennon had an interest in the bay, in the people fished from it. Everyone knew that.

Now Robin Corliss's clothes were in an evidence bag on the backseat.

She'd been wearing black leggings, a red windbreaker over a white turtleneck, a black sports bra beneath that. White socks with gray pads in the toes and heels. Adidas running shoes. There was a black baseball cap, and inside it, neatly coiled, there'd been a tennis bracelet. Thirty-eight diamonds set in white gold. He'd put on latex gloves, had lifted all this into the evidence bags without unfolding anything. Nothing could be lost. It might all come down to a hair, a carpet fiber.

But he didn't think there'd be much there. Except for the one hit from a

seagull on the windbreaker, it was all perfectly clean. He could even smell the detergent, the fabric softener.

On the island, they'd gone through her backpack, but other than the wallet, there'd been nothing noteworthy. She carried a set of keys and her wallet. A small energy drink; a half-eaten chocolate bar, its wrapper twisted up and pinched at the top. Saving the rest for later. He wondered what else she'd have brought if she'd known where she was really going.

They were only halfway across the bridge now.

"That bracelet," Garcia asked. "How much would it go for?"

"If it's real? Twenty grand."

"What do you think?"

"I think it's real."

"About this, I mean."

"I don't know," Kennon said. "Let's see her dad."

Angela Chun was so new to their section that she didn't have anything yet. No partner, no desk, no cases. She was young, had no experience. She wanted to be called by her first name. But he'd never known a cop who'd miss a chance to freeload, and he didn't mean to be the first. He and Garcia had been giving her work. They planned to keep at it until the lieutenant sorted things out, took her away from them.

She was at his desk, using his computer.

"Inspector Chun. You ready?"

"It's Angela. And gimme a sec," she said. "I'm printing this."

"Printing what?"

"Research. Whatever I can find online."

"This guy, her dad—he's meeting us at her place?"

"That's right."

"How'd he seem?"

"Like you'd expect," she said. She got up and slid past him, going to the printer. "But hard to gauge. It was over the phone, you know?"

Angela directed them across Market and then west on Geary. At Twenty-second Avenue, they hit the fog. Garcia played with the heater, trying to clear the windshield. They went at a crawl for eight blocks until Angela told him to hang a right on Thirtieth.

The house was on Sea Cliff Avenue, overlooking China Beach. Garcia parked, and for a moment no one got out.

"Jesus," Angela said.

"What's he do, again?" Garcia said. "The dad."

"Started a tech company, I think."

"He did okay."

The house was two stories, that they could see, but Kennon thought there might have been more of it hanging off the cliff. It was in the Spanish style, stucco, with a roof of curved tiles. Balconies on the upper floors looked down on the tiered stone fountain in the center of the circular drive.

There were two other cars in the driveway.

"You think he's inside?" Garcia asked.

"I told him to stay out," Angela said. "I didn't want—"

The driver's door of the Mercedes in front of them swung open. The man who stepped out wore a wool jacket over a black T-shirt. Jeans and loafers.

His hair was cloudy white, floating around his head. He shut his door and stood looking at Garcia's headlights.

"You talked to him on the phone," Kennon said to Angela. "Take the lead on this."

"All right."

She got out of the Blazer first, and then Kennon and Garcia followed.

Before coming upstairs, Kennon had learned that Robin's fiancé was a partner at Nishi Benedicto. He was opening the firm's first overseas office, had been in Frankfurt for the last three months. She loved him very much, Corliss said. That put the fiancé out of the picture, but the relationship gave Kennon a framework. Context for what he might find upstairs. Angela was keeping Corliss busy in the kitchen. It would be easier on all of them if he didn't see Kennon toss his daughter's bedroom.

He came in and turned on the light, looking around the room while he put on his gloves. It was clean. The bed was made, and the air smelled of fresh linens. There must have been a maid. He'd have to find out about that.

He started with the drawer in the nightstand. There was a paperback copy of Virginia Woolf's diary, a bottle of over-the-counter sleeping pills, a lipstickmarked flask of good-smelling scotch—Lagavulin, he thought. Under the flask, he found a bottle of Midol, a round disk of birth-control pills, and a medal from a swimming competition. There was an art book with photographs of piercings and tattoos, a pair of foam earplugs, a tangled pair of earphones.A votive candle, a leather-bound diary. The diary was the last thing in the drawer and he stood up with it and opened it.

Every page was empty.

Next to the bathroom sink, there was a framed photograph of Robin Corliss with her fiancé. They'd posed in front of the War Memorial Opera House. His tuxedo probably wasn't rented. She wore an off-the-shoulder evening gown, the silk as black as her hair. He picked up the frame and studied her. She'd fit into the opera crowd, he thought, if she remembered to keep a lid on it.

Just looking at her, he knew she'd be more comfortable running down a

beach in Cancun. Nothing on her breasts but the moonlight. There was something wild in her. He thought of Sandy. The little diamond stud in her bellybutton that flashed sometimes, even in the dark of his bedroom. She wanted things he'd never done, never thought to do. He could see it in Robin too. He could guess it from the sideways cast of her eyes, from the way she held herself, the dress just something to endure until she could come out of it.

Wild, he thought.

He came back into the kitchen and showed William Corliss the evidence bags.

"I'll need your permission," Kennon said.

"A hairbrush? Her toothbrush?"

"Fingerprints, DNA."

Corliss swallowed, then nodded.

"You're her biological father, right?" Kennon said. "She wasn't adopted?"

"She's my daughter—my own daughter."

Kennon took the DNA collection swab from Garcia. He gave it to Corliss.

"Do you mind?" Kennon asked. He wanted to put it delicately, but wasn't sure how. "We don't know for sure it's her toothbrush. Or that she's the only woman who uses it. But with yours too, we'll know we've got it right."

"I swab it in my mouth?"

"Inside your cheek—that's right. Like that."

When Corliss was finished, he gave the sealed container back to Garcia. His hands were shaking.

"I just want her to come home," he said.

"She liked to swim," Angela said.

They were driving back to 850 Bryant Street. She was in the front seat and Kennon was behind her.

"Corliss said she'd always liked it," Garcia said. "She got it from him."

"You know the Dolphin Club?" Angela asked. "Sponsors the Polar Bear Challenge?"

"No."

"This swim club, at the Aquatic Park. December, they have a contest. You race to be the first person to swim forty miles. This is in the bay, not a pool."

"She was a member?"

"Since she was sixteen."

"She was training for it?"

"She won it last year," Angela said. "She won it in eight days. Five miles every morning."

"So now what do you think?" Garcia said. "She's happy. Dad's happy. She loves this guy in Germany. We know he didn't kill her."

"It doesn't look good," Kennon said.

" *Death by misadventure,"* Garcia said. "Isn't that what Henry would write?"

The boats stayed out all night, and at first light, the divers went in the water a second time. At noon, the SFPD helicopter joined. It swept low along the shore of Treasure Island, then worked in swaths farther out. Kennon watched from Robin's office on the 26th floor at One Market Plaza.

Corliss was the firm's biggest client. He'd called ahead, and they were ready for Kennon. They'd unlocked her computer, had come up with a protocol. A lawyer would read the subject lines from her inbox and outbox. If Kennon wanted to see the e-mail, the lawyer would decide if it was privileged. If it wasn't, Kennon could read it. If it was, they'd move on. Argue about it later.

They read her e-mail all morning, and then broke for lunch. He called Garcia from the ground-level food court.

"There's nothing," he said. "She loves the guy, and he's in Germany. Some of the e-mails are so hot, the kid I'm with, this lawyer, he needs air. Some of the photos too. But that's it. Nothing."

"You gonna keep going?"

"Of course I'll keep going."

He met Garcia and Angela in a red vinyl booth at Lori's Diner, on Mason Street. They still didn't know how Robin Corliss had gotten to Yerba Buena Island. She hadn't driven there herself. Her car was still in her driveway. There was a bus that ran out to Yerba Buena and Treasure Island, so maybe she'd taken that. There was no way to walk across the bridge.

Kennon poured cream into his coffee and swirled the mug to stir it.

"Two things stick out. One, she lives on China Beach. If she's training for a cold ocean swim, why go to Yerba Buena? And two, she's got a Mercedes. She could've parked where we did. Who'd take a bus if she could drive that car?"

Angela was shaking her head.

"What?" he asked.

"I went to the Dolphin Club today."

"Okay."

"She'd swim off Yerba Buena. She thought the water was cleaner, the current better. She didn't swim off China Beach because she didn't like the open ocean."

"Sharks," Garcia said.

"Did she swim naked?" Kennon asked.

"I don't know," Angela answered. "Maybe she had a swimsuit in the backpack. She could've changed under the bridge, that on-ramp."

"Where are her panties?"

"Maybe she wasn't wearing any," Angela said. "Or she had a two-piece, and she was wearing the bottom under her clothes."

"You don't like it," Garcia said, looking at Kennon.

"What else do we have?" Kennon said. "This is all we've got."

"Or maybe she went in naked," Angela said, stirring her coffee with her fork. "We've all seen her picture. We know the type. She had a wild streak, and it finally caught up."

It went cold after that.

He met William Corliss at a coffee shop. Not because there was any news, but because he had to. That was how it worked. The man hadn't shaved, and his eyes were red. His car, parked at the curb, had a long scrape running down its right side.

"What happens now?" Corliss asked.

"We keep working it. As long as we have to."

"It's easier for you—you've got something to do. But me? She's gone, and there's nowhere to go. No stone with her name on it, no date to mark it."

"You want her declared dead, you should talk to your lawyers," Kennon said. "But it takes time."

"You think she's dead, though," Corliss said.

Kennon didn't answer. It didn't matter what he thought. It only mattered what he could prove, and right now, he couldn't prove anything.

"I can't stand this," Corliss said. He lurched to his car.

He worked his other cases. The bay gave him bodies, but not Robin's. Two weeks after Thanksgiving, he took his first vacation in eight years. Sandy's idea. They drove up to Mendocino in her car and stayed in a bed-and-breakfast on a cliff overlooking the Pacific. He looked out the window at the ocean and tried to think of words to describe it.

Storm-tossed. Wine-dark. Things like that.

Coming here, he'd thought they'd explore the cliffs. See a beach. He wasn't sure what they were supposed to do. Take walks, maybe. Look in antique shops. But it rained the whole time, and they stayed in the room.

Sandy didn't mind. He saw a lot of the diamond, flashing in the dark.

It was on the drive back that Garcia called him with the news.

"You have to take it?" Sandy asked. "Look at this. I mean, look at it."

He held the phone out, but she couldn't see its screen. She was driving, focused on the curves. Ice plants clung in mats to the hillside on their left, and then to the right the land fell away altogether. Just empty space, and then the ocean. The sun had finally come out. The water was so blue it was startling.

"I've got to," he said. "It's Garcia."

"Then take it."

He'd asked Sandy to drop him at the station, but changed his mind and got out three blocks early. When he leaned across, she pulled back.

"It's because they'll see me, right?"

He looked around.

"It's nothing about you," he said. "It's them, what they'll think."

"Because you're banging a white girl? Or because she's still in college?"

"It's just—I don't want to be that guy," he said. "Whatever it is they'd think, I don't want to be it."

"All right," Sandy said.

She didn't look mad. He wasn't even sure what that would be like.

"Can I wait at your place?"

He nodded. It must have been okay, then. He walked to the station, then down to the basement morgue. He asked for Dr. Newcomb at the front desk, and waited there until he came out.

"Henry," he said. He shook the medical examiner's hand. "Garcia told me."

"They're waiting for us," Henry said. "They won't start until we get there."

They were in Henry's car, going east across the Bay Bridge. In the tunnel, punching through Yerba Buena, he turned to Henry.

"I let her down on this," he said. "I focused on the wrong things. Things that shouldn't make any difference."

Henry nodded, and that stung. But that was Henry. There was no bullshit. You could go a long way on that.

They passed Oakland before Henry spoke.

"It was a good setup," he said. "The clothes and everything. Putting them on the rocks like that."

"It had all of us. But it was my call. My choice to read it that way."

He thought about the time they'd lost. It wore away at everything. When your case sat for weeks while you looked in the wrong place, what came out the other side was smooth and featureless. A stone from beneath a glacier.

"Their guy any good, the coroner?" he asked.

"He's all right. He's not touchy. That's the best thing. He won't mind if I step in, do more than just watch."

It was two hours to Stockton. The San Joaquin County coroner's office was in the sheriff's complex, at the south end of town. The sheriff and the coroner already had her out of cold storage and on a rolling autopsy table. She was under a blue sheet, and was warming up. The room reeked of her. They shook hands all around and he followed Henry to the wash station. They borrowed surgical masks and safety glasses. He put on gloves, though

he planned to touch nothing.

The coroner approached him with a legal-sized envelope.

"We washed the mud off," he said, "but there's pictures of how she was. I made you a packet."

"Thanks," Kennon said.

He took it and looked at the first photograph. She looked like an effigy made of mud and grass. A rancher southeast of town had found her in his stock pond. He'd been using a rake to clear weeds from the edges. Cattails, lily pads. Pond scum and Robin Corliss.

When he looked up, Henry and the coroner had moved to either side of the table. They pulled the sheet back. Kennon stayed for the rest of the autopsy, but he could've walked out right then. It took him a second to see it, to make sense of it, and then he had all he needed. The ligature was still around her neck, blue and gray veins bulging on her face.

*Weeks,* he thought. *I've lost weeks.*

They were already in the booth when he got to Lori's. He slid in and ordered a coffee.

"We go back to the beginning," he said. "Where I should've started when we got this."

"Interview everyone she knew, everyone who saw her," Garcia said. "Make a timeline, and fit everyone on it."

Kennon shook his head. "We start with the call."

"What call?"

"How we got there in the first place," Kennon said. "A man called, told the desk officer about a backpack. Clothes folded on the rocks. He said it didn't look right, that it worried him. We start with him."

Angela stirred at her coffee. He looked at them and saw they didn't get it yet.

"The guy who killed her, he put that stuff on Yerba Buena to throw us off. He wanted us to see it. He couldn't afford for us not to see it, or else we might've really investigated. So if he needed it that bad, why not call it in himself?"

There was a call log in the station, and they traced the number to a pay phone. Angela looked up the address and read it out: 358 Beach Street.

"That's a diner," she said. She turned around from Kennon's computer. "An all-night coffee shop."

"The Wharf," Kennon said. "I know it. Pay phone's at the end of the hall. By the men's room."

"Maybe they've got a camera," Angela said.

"They'd have recorded over it. We're weeks too late."

"So what do we do?"

"Hope a waitress saw him on the phone. That it stood out because no one uses pay phones. When's the last time you used one?"

"What about Corliss?" Angela asked.

"What about him?"

"Do we tell him we found her?"

He had to think about that a moment. He'd remember, later, making the decision. He'd reach out to Sandy, touch her under the covers. He'd stare at the ceiling and feel himself twist on it, that point where he could've gone either way.

"Not yet," he said. "We keep it close for a couple of days. See if we can break something loose. I trust him, but I don't trust him not to talk. And if it gets out we found her, our guy might start tossing evidence."

There wasn't a camera.

The manager let Kennon look at the shift schedule, and they found the waitresses who'd been working when the call came in. Except, they didn't remember anything. Of course they didn't.

They left the diner and stood on the sidewalk.

"Now what?" Angela asked.

"We call it a night."

"That's it?"

"For now," he said.

But when they got to Garcia's Blazer, he didn't get in. His apartment wasn't far. He could walk it in fifteen minutes. He watched them drive off, and then he started. He thought of the way the divers had searched the dark water, using string set at a fixed point to guide them along ever widening circles. It was his fault they'd wasted their time.

She'd been missing since Friday, or maybe since Thursday night. He might have followed her home on Thursday, might have killed her in the bedroom. After, he'd have driven her to San Joaquin. He'd set the decoy on Yerba Buena sometime Friday morning. But by Saturday, he was worried no one would see it. That his deception was too subtle. So he called it in, at 12:05. At lunchtime.

Maybe that was it. He'd been at work, and it was gnawing at him. When he got a break, he went looking for a payphone.

So it was somewhere around here. Five minutes from here. He went in widening circles.

He stopped when he saw the coffee shop. He'd seen that name, that curly green script. He was standing at the corner of Jefferson and Leavenworth. He turned around, putting himself inside Robin Corliss's landscape. The Aquatic Park was a block behind him. To reach her office from the swim club, she'd have come down Jefferson. She'd pass it every time. Cold from her

swim, her hair still wet.

A cab came and he flagged it down.

"Bryant Street," he said. "The Hall of Justice."

He got her box from the evidence room, signed the custody slip, and took it to one of the tables. He broke the seal and opened it, then found the bag with her wallet. He put on gloves and shook the wallet into his hand. He flipped past the credit cards, past her license.

There, in the back, he found the coffee-shop stamp cards. She'd been a loyal customer; she had enough stamps to buy six free drinks. She'd never used them. The money wouldn't have meant anything. He flipped the cards over, and there it was. The shop's name, that curly green script.

He explained it when they got to the office.

He was on his fourth cup of coffee, but he had it all now. Calvin Vonn, in forensics, had lifted prints from all six cards. They'd been handled many times, by many people, but two sets stood out. They knew Robin's from her hairbrush. The other set was a mystery, until they ran it.

James Conroy had a record. He'd raped a girl on his college swim team, at a meet in San Diego. He'd done six months for it. His parole officer helped him get the job at the coffee shop. He pulled espresso shots and talked to the girls. He still liked to swim.

"Do we arrest him now?" Angela asked. "Put him under surveillance?"

"Arrest," Garcia said. He turned to Kennon. "Right?"

"We'll get a no-knock, go in with SWAT. We can hold him twenty-four hours. If we haven't found it by then, he's not our guy."

Garcia nodded.

"It'll be the panties," Kennon said. "When they found her, she wasn't wearing any. And there weren't any on Yerba Buena. He kept them. They were his trophy."

It was that evening that he went looking for Corliss. He wanted to sit him down, face to face, and tell him what they'd done. James Conroy was sitting in a watched cell at 850 Bryant. He'd stand in front of a judge in the morning. He'd go away for it. Everything they'd found behind the door of his rented room, he didn't have a chance.

Kennon wanted to tell Corliss these things, wanted to let him say whatever he needed to say. Or maybe Corliss wouldn't speak at all, and after Kennon said his piece, they'd just sit together awhile. Drink their drinks. The point was just to be there, to let Corliss pick how it went.

He called his cell and got no answer, and went to his house but found no one there. He went to Robin's, and her car was in the roundabout behind the fountain, but Corliss wasn't there.

Afterward, he wasn't sure what led him to the spot. He hadn't liked the way Corliss looked. And there was that scrape, deep as the metal, down the side of his car. He couldn't know if Corliss would have done it anyway. Telling him sooner might have made no difference. He couldn't prove it either way. But he knew what he believed: that he'd never have done it if he'd known it wasn't the right way. It wasn't even close.

Kennon crossed the Bay Bridge, took the exit at Yerba Buena. He stopped at the pullout. The Mercedes wasn't there, but he knew he had to go down anyway, had to check. He took a flashlight from the glove box and then went out. He climbed over the guardrail and picked his way down the loose-scrabble path to the shoreline.

He went out on the rocks and shone the light around. Right away he found it. Corliss had left his shoes together, had folded his pants and boxer shorts on top of them. His shirt and jacket were to the side. In the jacket pocket, he found a Rolex watch. His billfold and cell phone.

He put it all back on the rocks, carefully. He took out his own phone and called it in.

# THE ASCENT

***by Scott Mackay*** | 5296 words

**Scott Mackay is an award-winning author in both the mystery and science-fiction fields. He received Canada's most prestigious mystery award, the Arthur Ellis, in the best short story category, for his 1998 *EQMM* story *Last Inning,* and he took home a John W. Campbell Memorial Award in 2001 for best science-fiction novel. As this issue goes to press, he is nominated again for a best short story Arthur Ellis Award, for his June 2015 *EQMM* story "The Avocado Kid."**

In the Cordillera Central, at an elevation of three thousand meters, Dr. Benjamin Nesdale, expatriate American, a guide and physician with the South American Bird Conservancy, had us get off our horses and ford a fastmoving stream.

I was forty-two, survivor of a recent divorce, and was beginning to suspect myself of affection for the doctor. He was tall, a year or two older, well built in a way one didn't see often in middle-aged men, calm, and exacting in the way he spoke. He gave me his hand and helped me from my horse. Andean peaks fringed the horizon.

Two mestizo guides—brown, silent boys—took our dismounted horses further downstream to cross separately. We adventurous ladies of the Pamlico Sound Birding Society, with the help of Dr. Nesdale—the tour company routinely hired the doctor in a dual capacity, not only as a doctor but as a birding guide—prepared to traverse this narrower aperture by utilizing a rope bridge.

The seven of us were breathless from high altitude—coming from Pamlico Sound, we were all sea-level girls. Heidi Binstock, my best friend, was more breathless than the others. Even now, as Dr. Nesdale showed her how to clutch the top rope, she exhibited not only some respiratory trouble but, if her unusual fear of crossing the bridge was an indication, also hypoxiainduced excitability.

"I'm going to fall."

"You'll have the harness," assured Dr. Nesdale.

I did my best to calm her. "Heidi, it's perfectly safe. Isn't that right, Dr. Nesdale?"

The doctor was now staring at Heidi with a clinical eye.

"I think I'm going to increase your Diamox dose, Heidi." He now looked at

the group in general. "Heidi doesn't want to go first. Do I have any volunteers?"

Looking for approbation, I stepped forward. "I'll go."

Nesdale knelt, gripped the bottom rope with his right hand and the top with his left.

"My dear," he invited.

After attaching myself to the safety harness, I proceeded.

As he held the ropes, I felt secure. I moved over the tributary. I made it to the other side safely.

The rest of the ladies crossed without mishap.

Heidi went last.

I watched from the other side as the doctor coaxed my friend. Heidi was not herself. I saw the doctor gently assert with a gesture how effective the safety harness was. Heidi at last moved forward.

I thought all would be fine, that she would make the crossing without calamity despite the out-of-whack carbon-dioxide levels in her blood. But then Dr. Nesdale, showing sudden animation, lifted his right hand from the lower rope and pointed to the sky.

"Look! By those peaks! An Andean condor. Get your field glasses!"

We rushed to get our field glasses. We quickly looked up, our backs now turned to the doctor and Heidi. I searched the heights. I did not see the characteristic black cross and white collar. In fact, I saw no bird at all. I looked and looked, motivated by approval I might get from the doctor for a sighting, and continued to scan the sky until I heard a cry and splash from behind.

I turned and saw Heidi in the mountain stream, safety harness now unfastened and the current pushing her away from us at an alarming rate. She was bashed about the rocks. Blood appeared on her forehead. Dr. Nesdale left the bridge and ran along the side of the stream after her. He disappeared behind some pines. The ladies erupted with fretful chatter as we lost sight of not only the doctor but also Heidi.

I set off after them.

By and by, I found Dr. Nesdale kneeling next to Heidi, ministering to a gash on her forehead. Heidi was soaked, and shivering badly.

"She gave her left ankle a bad twist in the initial fall. She's sprained it. It's swelling. I'm more concerned about her ankle than I am about this gash."

I knelt next to my friend. She was staring at me with terrified blue eyes.

"He tried to *kill* me."

I looked up at the object of my burgeoning affections and became his willing pupil. "Is that the altitude sickness again, Doctor?"

He nodded. "Like I say, I plan to increase her Diamox."

At the thirty-one-hundred-meter mark, where we were to stop for a day and

a half, Heidi's delusions, despite the doctor's assurances, persisted.

"I never told you about Dr. Ketchum. Ian Ketchum. I knew him in California."

"Does it really sound plausible, Heidi, that he should change his name and come all the way to South America?"

She motioned in the general direction of the stream. "Dr. Ketchum yanked the rope from under my feet, and that's when I slipped and fell."

I was growing impatient with her continued allegations. "His name's not Dr. Ketchum."

"He was in love with me, Chloe. In California. Before I met Sam."

"Yes, but Heidi, why am I finding out just now?"

"I ended up ruining his life, that's why."

I tried to get her to focus on the fact that she was suffering from an illness.

"Dr. Nesdale says you have altitude sickness. Delusions are a real possibility."

She was only half listening.

"My ankle is killing me."

"Let me go see if he'll give you another tablet for the pain."

I left her cot and headed for the doctor's field tent.

Six regular tents were arranged in a semicircle around a large central campfire. Some of the girls sat by the fire sharing wine as well as birding notes. The sky was clear, its blue-black surface pitted with a million stars. I made my way to Nesdale's tent and called from outside.

"Dr. Nesdale?"

It took him a moment, but finally he responded.

"Yes... yes? Chloe?"

"Sorry to bother you so late.

"No, no. Come in."

I went inside.

"Heidi is in bad pain. I'm wondering if she can have another tablet."

He had a camp table, chair, and kerosene lamp set up. His cot was made in crisp military fashion, and the rest of the interior was scrupulously neat. He was composing sighting notifications to the conservancy on his iPad, and he had changed out of his riding gear into a pair of woolen slacks, a mauve linen shirt, and a blue sweater vest.

"I thought it might get worse."

"You can see it in her face."

He paused. "She still thinks I'm Dr. Ketchum?"

"She does."

"Who is this Dr. Ketchum?"

"A man she says she ruined in California."

He grew concerned. "I hope she's not developing cerebral edema."

I wasn't an expert, so got him to illuminate.

"An accumulation of fluid on the brain," he explained. "She's taking the increased dose of Diamox?"

"I'm making sure."

"And how long ago did she know this other doctor in California?"

"Fifteen years ago."

He thought for a few moments. "Why don't I go see how she's doing?"

Once he had his bag, and we were on our way back, I filled him in on more of the Dr. Ian Ketchum fantasy.

When I was done, he said, "Hazel. It's not a name you find often these days."

"That's what I told her."

"And she says I was married to this Hazel?"

"Yes."

"And she's convinced I tried to kill her at the stream?"

"Yes."

"I'll double-check the Diamox. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe there's something wrong with the batch."

Back at our tent, Heidi was dozing. We roused her with our entrance.

When she saw the doctor, fear shot through her eyes.

"Ian, please. Sam had as much to do with it as I did. Especially the trial."

I stared at my friend, then turned to Dr. Nesdale. "She hasn't mentioned anything about a trial yet."

Heidi continued, "I don't go around destroying people's lives for the fun of it, Ian, I really don't. Sam put me up to it."

Nesdale leaned forward and took Heidi's hand. "Chloe tells me your pain is bad, Ms. Binstock. I'm going to give you something with a little more kick than what I gave you before. Are you allergic to narcotics?"

"Ian, you know that I'm not. Your nurse took my history when I first came to you."

"We'll try you on a single tab of Percocet, then." He took out a bottle of large white tablets and made her swallow one. "I'd like to see your Diamox now. I want to see if the damp's gotten into it. Where are you keeping it?"

She nodded, pointed. "In that bag."

Nesdale went over and opened the bag.

After digging through, he found my friend's Diamox in a regular prescription bottle. He opened it and tapped a capsule onto his palm. A little plastic egg, half solid orange, the other half clear, the capsule contained dozens of tiny tangerine-colored grains. He lifted the dose to his nose, smelled it, and, satisfied, put it back.

"It doesn't smell like the damp has gotten into it," he said. He put the capsules back into her bag. "Heidi, you realize it's a little strange to believe I'm another doctor you met in California fifteen years ago. I've never been to

California. So what I want you to do is rest. It's all about oxygen with this type of condition, and with rest, your oxygen saturation will improve. The ladies and I will look after the camp. We don't want you doing anything. We'll be staying at this elevation for the next thirty-six hours. With the increased dose of Diamox, and the halt to our ascent, you should start to feel better soon."

Tears welled up again. "The trial was all Sam's idea, Ian, I swear it was."

Going to the doctor's tent later to give him an update, I was much endeared when, upon entering, Nesdale put his poncho around my shoulders and directed me to sit on a chair next to a small charcoal brazier—the mountain air was cold.

He poured good French brandy. I gave him my update. He gave me more brandy.

When I was warm enough, I moved toward the tent flaps, preparing to depart. I pulled them aside. Before I could exit, Nesdale came up from behind, put his hands on my shoulders, and wouldn't let me go.

I allowed the flaps to fall back in place, not bothering with the return journey through the cold air for the next hour or so.

Around the campfire the next morning, the ladies of the Pamlico Sound Birding Society did what they usually did: listened to South American birdsong on the doctor's miniaturized custom-made boom box so they would have a better idea of what to listen for in the wild. The quality of the audio on this machine was superb, and it made the birds sound as if they were right in camp.

Heidi was sitting with us, looking better, if a little pensive. As we listened to the birdsong, she leaned over.

"All those things I said about Dr. Nesdale last night. He'll never forgive me."

Dr. Nesdale meanwhile talked to his two mestizo guides at the end of the camp. He was speaking to them in their native Quechuan. The three looked at the sky with some foreboding. Dr. Nesdale gave me a faint, preoccupied grin— something was definitely going on.

"He's a compassionate and understanding man, Heidi. I'm sure he'll forgive you. And it wasn't your fault."

"It was all so long ago. I don't know how it got mixed up in my mind now. I would never sue any doctor for malpractice these days. The insurance paid — Sam's experts were pretty sly—but it wrecked Ian's career. And his marriage."

At breakfast, Nesdale made an announcement.

"I'm afraid Elvio says extremely bad weather is moving up from a lower elevation. As much as we were planning to stay here for a day and a half, he advises me that the only way we can avoid getting caught is to move up the

mountain. This area becomes dangerous when it's wet because of mudslides. Heidi, I'll again adjust your dose of Diamox to account for the unavoidable ascent we now must make. And I have a canister of oxygen to at least partially alleviate some of your more troubling symptoms."

So we climbed.

We climbed all morning and most of the afternoon. I kept looking down the mountain for the storm that was supposed to follow us, but all I saw at lower elevations was voluminous quantities of clear air, no sign of a falling barometer anywhere.

We fed and watered the horses at three o'clock. The animals, born and bred at these high altitudes, showed no sign of respiratory distress. The ladies of the Pamlico Sound Birding Society, on the other hand, did. All complained of headache. Some reported dizziness, blurred vision, and nausea. Alice, the oldest in our group, was sick in a bush.

Perhaps the worst sufferer, though, was Heidi, despite the increased dose of Diamox, with more intense symptoms of mountain delirium. At thirty-eight, she was the second youngest in our group, a robust and usually healthy-looking woman who traveled regularly each year to Algonquin in Canada for a one-month canoe trip. But now she looked as old as Alice. Her skin was gray, her eyes half closed, and her movements circumscribed into small and painful tics dictated by how horrible her dizziness, nausea, and disorientation was making her feel. Her skin had a waxy look. And her usually clear blue eyes were lackluster with pale mistiness. Even when Dr. Nesdale gave her several blasts from the oxygen canister, her condition did not improve.

Alice piped in, "You're sure you have the saturation knob properly adjusted?"

Alice, a nurse before retirement, was a small roosterlike woman, and had her gray hair tied in a ponytail with a peg-and-leather clasp. Large glasses gave her face an owlish appearance and her overall smallness lent her an aspect of an animated toy.

The doctor spoke to her in terms I didn't understand. "I have it up to two and a half."

"Then why isn't she responding? I don't see the dial moving."

"The dial took a knock. We'll have to get a replacement when we reach summit camp."

"Is that knob working?"

With some exasperation, Nesdale said, "The knob is working."

Heidi talked to herself.

I thought I would hear more about Dr. Ketchum, but other than letting slip he practiced internal medicine, I learned nothing new about the matter. Mostly, she just rambled about how difficult the ascent had been for her.

It had been hard on all of us.

Adventurous ladies, we had perhaps been too confident in signing up for it in the first place, even though the tour operator had taken every precaution, including the hiring of a doctor/guide to be our maestro for the undertaking.

We were all definitely dazed by the thin air—air so thin you had to gasp for its meager particles.

I felt that in the sparse atmosphere, reasonable judgment, even in my own Diamox-responding mind, was uprooting itself. Oxygen deprivation made the mountain landscape seem more like a dreamscape. Dr. Nesdale pointed out various birds—the blue-winged mountain tanager, the yellow-breasted brush finch, and the white-tipped quetzel. To me, because I had never seen any of these birds before, and because I now existed in an altered and hypoxic state, they were all magical birds from a Colombian fairytale, more Gabriel García Márquez than John James Audubon.

We climbed into the lonely mountains.

An hour later, Heidi slumped forward in her saddle and lost consciousness.

The guides jumped from their animals. I watched, detached, and as if through an anaesthetizing fog. Dr. Nesdale dismounted. He and the guides helped Heidi from her horse. A camp roll was placed on the ground and Heidi was laid upon it. The doctor knelt. He dug in his bag and gave her some oxygen from the canister. She opened her eyes. He nodded as if satisfied with this particular ministration.

Then, soon, much too soon, he left her—gasping—and went over to a large brown mare. He opened a scuffed saddlebag and pulled out a radio. He set the radio up on some rocks—no cell-phone service up here. When he turned it on, the radio refused to come to life. He tried and tried. He fussed and fussed. Finally, he opened the back and pulled out the battery. The battery looked old. Its label had been ripped. He inspected its negative and positive nodes. I saw staining around the nodes, evidence of battery-acid leakage.

"I wanted to radio a helicopter for Heidi," he said, his voice sounding as if it came from the end of a long pipe over the high-altitude tinnitus I was currently suffering.

He pulled another bag off the brown mare, looked through it, and his movements quickly became agitated. He found some extra batteries and put them into the radio. But when he tried to transmit, all he got was static. He turned the dial to other frequencies but still got only static. He then took the batteries out and tried others. He got the same response—nothing. He inspected the radio more closely, focusing particularly on the damage done by the battery acid. He turned to one of the guides.

"Elvio, let me try yours."

But Elvio's radio turned out to be for local transmission only, more just a

large walkie-talkie, and in these high mountain passes, and through the thick snow-covered peaks, would not traverse the necessary distance or penetrate the miles of rock. Despite making all provision to the contrary, including backup batteries, we were, for the moment, incommunicado with the outside world.

"You mean there's not a second radio?" asked Alice, with some of her own acid. Nesdale's face stiffened. "No, Alice. There isn't."

As the sun went down, an ad hoc committee consisting of myself, Dr. Nesdale, and Alice convened in Dr. Nesdale's field tent.

"And so without a working radio," said Alice, "we have no way of getting down the mountain except by horseback?"

"Exactly. We'll just have to rely on our helicopter pickup point seven hundred meters further up."

"Won't that be dangerous for Heidi?"

"I'm concerned about continued ascent, and I'm not sure why she's not responding to the Diamox, but I don't see what choice we have."

"Could one of the guides ride ahead, make contact up there, and have the helicopter meet us? Wasn't that what you tried the radio for?"

"I was a little confused. The altitude is getting to all of us. I wasn't taking into consideration that there's nowhere to land in this particular area." He motioned. "Look at it. It's all crag and bluff. It would be too dangerous, even with a rescue sled."

"So what do we do?"

"The best option—at least the most time-saving option—is for all of us to continue the ascent to the summit camp."

"And at the summit camp there's a radio?" asked Alice.

"Yes."

"In your considered opinion, which option is most likely to give her the best outcome? Up or down?"

The terseness in Alice's voice made me wonder if she was actually starting to believe Heidi's ludicrous allegations against the doctor.

"I believe if I increase her Diamox yet again, a quick ascent would be in her best interests. She would get timely care."

"Then I say we make a *slow* descent on horseback," said Alice flatly.

Nesdale looked bewildered to have his experienced medical opinion so bluntly contradicted.

Alice continued, "There's something fishy about this whole thing, Doctor. First, she accidentally falls into the stream. You make us go up the mountain because you said a storm was coming, and no storm came. She's not responding to the Diamox. She's not responding to the oxygen. The meter on the oxygen canister isn't working. The radio isn't working. And there's no backup radio." Alice shook her head. "That there's no backup radio is a gross

and ridiculous oversight. It just doesn't seem possible that there isn't one. You knew there was no cell-phone service up here. What are you doing wrong, Dr. Nesdale? If that is your real name."

Nesdale sighed. "I see Heidi's delusions have gotten to you, Alice."

"The last thing we want is to bring about a fatal event by making her go up the mountain any farther. Heidi tells me you lost everything after the trial. Maybe you *want* a fatal event. If I lost everything at a trial, I might too."

"I don't know of any trial."

"Did Hazel leave you?"

"I was never married to a woman named Hazel. Are you quite yourself, Alice?"

The old woman looked embarrassed for a moment or two. "I'm sorry, Doctor. But you must admit, it all seems rather odd."

After Alice had gone, and the doctor and I were sharing a glass of wine, he said to me, "I don't like that woman."

"But is she right?" I asked.

He looked at me in genuine shock. "You too, Chloe?"

"She has a point about there being a string of unfortunate circumstances."

"I'm a doctor and a guide. As much as I can control, I can't control circumstance."

"Yes, but is there any truth to what Heidi is saying?"

The doctor stared sullenly at the closed tent flaps.

"I'm not Dr. Ketchum. I never practiced internal medicine. I don't know who Sam is. I have no idea about this trial. I'm a birding enthusiast, a general practitioner, and a medical professor at Universidad del Norte who is on staff with the conservancy to act in the dual capacity of expedition director and doctor. That's all I am." With a little more heat than I would have expected, he added, "I've never been to California. I was never sued for malpractice. I never lost my career because of it. And I was *especially* never married to a woman named Hazel."

I was drifting off when I heard an awful yowling. Ghostlike and persistent, it made the horses skittish. The yowling grew more intense. The horses began to whinny. I heard hooves, and shouts—the mestizo guides were up and about— and Dr. Nesdale's voice.

"Jaguar, jaguar!"

My body stiffened. I heard gunfire, one shot, two, three, four, five, then hooves crescendoing into a stampede.

The doctor's voice rose above the din.

"Ladies! Back in your tents! The horses will trample you!"

The sound of the hooves slowly faded.

I lay there tensely for an hour before my muscles finally eased.

When we ladies emerged at dawn, morning birds were thick in the trees. The birds, the whole point of our expedition, were forgotten. We discovered that all our horses were gone, and that our ad-hoc final decision for a slow horseback descent down the mountain was no longer possible because it was much too far by foot. In other words, the doctor, suspiciously or not, and despite Heidi's worsening condition, was going to make us go up and up, getting his way despite Alice's strenuous objections to the contrary.

We had breakfast around the campfire. My own thoughts about everything were now becoming more and more mistrustful.

"Where are the guides?" I asked Nesdale.

He detected something in my voice and gave me a look. "After our horses."

"What are we going to do?" I sounded like an irritated wife.

"We've managed to find one horse."

"Just one?"

"Chloe, please."

"What's going on?"

"Mass hysteria, I should think."

"There's a side to you I don't like."

He steered the conversation back to practicalities. "Alice has got the horse at the stream for watering. We'll put Heidi on it and move up to the summit where we'll radio for a helicopter."

My wary thoughts dogged me. "But won't that be harmful to Heidi?"

"The extra Diamox is going to kick in."

Back in the tent, Heidi said to me, "Sam put me in touch with a lawyer who did such things. Sam needed money to pay off his backers. They weren't nice backers. And so I ruined Dr. Ketchum, Chloe. Hazel left him when she was eight months pregnant. That was the part that hurt him most. And for that I will never forgive myself."

I noticed it first the next day.

We were three hundred feet below the summit camp. We had her tied to the only recovered horse.

She kept pulling her left arm up in a spasmodic fashion. Choking sounds came from her throat. Her tongue protruded from her mouth, her face went pale, and blood ran from her nose.

More than ran.

Came gushing out.

Then she fell.

And when she landed, all respiration ceased.

For a man who kept such a neat tent, I was surprised by how messy Dr.

Nesdale's apartment in the coastal city of Barranquilla was. Papers and books covered every surface. Clothes were draped over chairs, and had found cozy backwaters under his bed. The dishes were done—I had to give him that—but the kitchen itself needed a good scrub.

Nesdale, once we arrived, didn't have time to put things in order right away because of the inquest.

So it fell upon me to tidy and clean.

A man with a perpetually calm grin, Nesdale came home the last day of the inquest with something approaching an ecstatic smile.

"The tour operator's risk waiver was in order. I'm in the clear."

Though I was glad to hear this, I still had questions. "Why didn't the Diamox help?"

He shook his head with brittle innocence. "Some people, in rare instances, are unresponsive to it. Not my fault. I couldn't have known."

Because the inquest as well as the expedition had been so time-consuming, Nesdale was now far behind in his university work, and had to spend twelve to fourteen hours a day at the Barranquilla campus of the Universidad del Norte. He didn't have time to unpack from our birding trek, and all his gear sat in the front room unattended.

For many days, because of Heidi's death, I didn't have the heart to unpack it for him. Those bags, I thought, contained too many reminders of our nightmare ascent, and I needed time before I could face them.

I ended up leaving them a long time, and a low rank odor—like the smell of a dead body—arose from them. Even then, I left them. Not until the rains came did I finally get around to it and begin unpacking the detritus of our fateful ascent.

I found first the radio that Nesdale had tried to contact the helicopter with. I stared at it for several seconds. I'm not a technical person, by any means, but I did manage to get the back off. I saw the dead battery with the ripped label, and the chemical staining around the negative and positive nodes. I was in Alice's camp now on this. It just didn't seem possible that such an important thing as an extra radio up in the Andes would be overlooked or at least left to chance in such an irresponsible way.

And in fact, a few minutes later, I did indeed find a second radio, a backup, and it was in excellent shape.

The nausea that came to my stomach when I found this radio made me feel as if I was again suffering from altitude sickness.

Not that I was scared, because I knew he loved me, and also knew no matter what, he would continue to love me, and never harm me. But my disillusionment was of the kind that made it difficult to breathe over the next several seconds.

I tried to convince myself that he'd been suffering from mild altitude sickness himself, and that, looking for the extra batteries, he'd been

confused, such as he had been confused about a helicopter being able to land in that area, and had forgotten about this backup radio. But my conviction was a hard thing to maintain, and I felt it slipping away.

I next discovered the oxygen canister. I looked at the knob—the one Alice had been so concerned about—and twisted it to see if it actually worked. Nothing came out. The canister was empty. Suspiciously so. I checked its capacity. I determined, after some calculation, that the amount administered to Heidi was far less than the capacity of the canister itself. Yet the canister was empty. My conviction in the doctor slipped even further.

I continued to scavenge.

I came to the audio device the doctor played instructive birdsong on, his nature-call boom box. I grew consumed with a new alarming possibility. I took the player to the dining-room table and plugged it in because its batteries had been removed. I pressed the play button and the first thing I heard was terrible yowling, the same screech and hiss I'd heard the night the horses had fled. The boom box made it sound as if the jaguar was in the room, such was the fine quality of the audio.

I tried to persuade myself that Nesdale was still innocent, that the jaguar had been real, and that—coincidentally—he had a recording of a jaguar on his nature-call boom box.

But then I finally came to his medicine bag.

I found Diamox.

Also capsules of medicine that looked exactly like Diamox. I read the label.

Cebocap No. 8 Placebo.

I'm no medical expert, but I certainly knew what a placebo was. I took one capsule out of the Diamox bottle, and one capsule out of the Cebocap bottle, and held them side-by-side. Identical. One tangerine-colored pharmaceutical couldn't be distinguished from the other.

I returned the Diamox capsule to its bottle, put the Cebocap down, got a clean sheet of paper from the desk, brought it back to the dining-room table, opened the cap, and spilled its small orange grains across the twenty-pound bond. I licked my fingertip and pressed it to the scattering of grains on the white paper. I lifted them to the tip of my tongue and tasted.

My eyes widened and my fear deepened.

It was sugar, only coated to look like medicine, certainly nothing that could be used to regulate the dangerous buildup of carbon dioxide in Heidi's blood as she climbed the Cordillera Central higher and higher.

I continued my search.

The next item I found was a client list from the tour operator. In that list were the names of the Pamlico Sound Birding Society ladies, including Heidi Binstock's. The difference with Heidi's name was that it was circled in blue ballpoint pen, not circled once, but circled again and again with a ferocity and pressure so angry that in one spot the ballpoint pen went right through.

Beside it were these words: "Strong family history of cerebral hemorrhage and stroke." How could he write this information about Heidi if he hadn't known her before?

I wanted to tell myself that the backup radio, the oxygen canister, the jaguar recording, the placebo, and even the way Nesdale had savagely circled Heidi's name on the list and then written a medical notation beside it had to be a series of bizarre coincidences. So I continued to search for something that would disprove everything. What I found instead when I went into Nesdale's personal bag was something that gelled them all into a compelling whole.

I discovered a photograph from the waning years of the last millennium. It showed a much younger Dr. Nesdale with a pretty woman of around thirty. The two lounged by a swimming pool. In the background, I saw hills, pale green, scrubby, characteristic of Southern California. The couple smiled. Dr. Nesdale had on his face not his usual calm grin but the ecstatic one he had worn after the end of the inquest. The woman wore a bikini, not the best attire in her present condition, which looked like a third-trimester pregnancy.

I flipped the photograph over and read:

"Ian and Hazel. Hazel seven months pregnant. By the pool in Glendale."

I then turned my attention to my own suitcases, fighting to control the storm of emotions that threatened to undo me.

I packed my suitcases while Nesdale was at the university looking after university business, called a taxi, went to the airport, and bought the next ticket available to any place that wasn't Barranquilla.

Then, from a *cabina telefónica* in the departure lounge, I called the *policía* and told them that I had left the evidence as is, in the apartment, and that the apartment door was unlocked.

I boarded my flight.

The jet took off.

It reached cruising altitude. But because the cabin was pressurized, I didn't feel the slightest symptom of altitude sickness.

In fact, I felt more clearheaded than I had in a long time.

# FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: With Murder's Red Pencil

257 words

While preparing these celebratory issues for *EQMM's* 75th anniversary I've found myself thinking, more than once, about the role chance plays in the fate of any publication. *EQMM* has had only three editors in all of its long history. Perhaps that very fact has contributed to its longevity, for certainly it has made possible a sense that there are elements of unbroken tradition at this publication.

This issue is dedicated to *EQMM's* first two editors, Frederic Dannay and Eleanor Sullivan—and also to Manfred B. Lee, Fred Dannay's other half as Ellery Queen. One of the luckiest chances that factored into the success of *EQMM* may have been that Fred had Manny, his partner in all things Ellery Queen, as a sounding board in the early days of the magazine. As this issue's article by Rand Lee reveals, Manny not only read *EQMM* but offered his opinions to Fred on its contents. Manny was not involved in the day-to-day business of the magazine, but as you'll see from one of the letters referenced in the Lee article, he could be full of praise for what Fred was accomplishing. More importantly, Fred was not a novice magazine editor when *EQMM* began its journey. He and Manny had jointly edited a previous, if short-lived publication, *Mystery League,* and what was learned there—with each laboring equally—would affect decisions made about the new magazine. No editor operates in a vacuum; there are always others who influence, even if only from the sidelines, the course taken. Hats off in this issue to all of those who have helped to guide *EQMM,* but especially to Fred, Manny, and Eleanor. —Janet Hutchings

# BLOG BYTES

***by Bill Crider*** | 346 words

The last time I wrote about the *Killer Hobbies* blog **(killerhobbies.blogspot.com)** back in 2009, I was working on a laptop far from home because at that point Hurricane Ike had left my house without power for nine days. I'm on my familiar desktop now, however, and I can report that while in 2009 there were seven writers maintaining the blog, there are now four who are posting regularly: Monica Ferris, Linda O. Johnston, Tracy Weber, and Betty Hechtman. They're still talking about their hobbies and their books, along with giving reports on the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books and the Sisters in Crime Hollywood event. They also have occasional guest posters, so the updates are regular and interesting.

*The Digest Enthusiast* is a magazine about digest magazines, and it's always chock full of interesting articles. Now there's a related blog **(larquepress.com/blog)** that's well worth your time. Recent posts have included a brief look at Harry Kemelman's first published story, "The NineMile Walk," which appeared in *EQMM* in 1947, a couple of entries about *The Mysterious Traveler Mystery Reader* that comment on stories by Robert Arthur and August Derleth, and a review of a short story in the current issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction.*

*Crossexaminingcrime* **(crossexaminingcrime.wordpress.com)** is devoted mostly to reviews of Golden Age mysteries like *The Mystery at Stowe* by Vernon Loder or *The Factory on the Cliff* by A.G. Macdonell. The

reviews are thorough, thoughtful, and engaging, but there's a lot more on the site, including links to Top Ten lists, quizzes, and puzzles. One feature is a list of translated crime fiction, with links to reviews of many of them. This is one of those sites that has so much material available that you need to set aside some time to look at it. You'll be amply rewarded.

"Secret agents, bachelor pads, and mini skirts!" *Spy Vibe* has all that, and more. ( **spyvibe.blogspot.com)** How can you resist? The recent long and lavishly illustrated post on "007 Tribute Covers" is just one of the many pleasures here. You'll also find links to spy-related sites devoted to *The Avengers,* James Bond, *The Prisoner, The Man From U.N.C.L.E.,* and many others. Set aside some time and enjoy the nostalgia you'll find on this entertaining site.

# THE JURY BOX

***by Steve Steinbock*** | 1126 words

Many of my favorite mysteries begin with a jarring impossibility, where the hero is confronted with events that contradict everything the hero (and by extension, the reader) knows is logically possible. The hero's journey is to set the world back on its foundations by uncovering the truth behind seemingly impossible situations. John Dickson Carr was legendary at plots like these. Fredric Brown did it a few times, both in his mysteries and his science fiction. Some of my other favorites end with everything the reader has been led to believe—up to that point—shown to be wrong. Christie did this famously, as did Carr. Margaret Millar wrote a novel ( *A Stranger in My Grave,* 1960) in which the entire story radically changes in the book's final words.

Today it's rare to find a book that accomplishes this kind of paradigmshift plotting. A few of the titles that we look at this month use sciencefiction elements to accomplish it, others use logic and misdirection. We'll look at new works by Harlan Coben, Craig Johnson, Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller,

and other notable writers, all of which demonstrate that classic "impossible crime" plots and contemporary tastes are not incompatible.

**** Sylvain Neuvel, *Sleeping Giants,* Del Rey, $26.00. A twelveyear-old girl falls through a hole in the ground and lands on a giant glowing metal hand. Seventeen years later, she is a highly trained physicist working on a team to crack the code of the ancient relic. The topsecret team is composed of brilliant minds working in close quarters where personalities are bound to clash. This debut novel by a Québecois linguist is told entirely in interviews and journal entries. Through a unique epistolary format, Neuvel's story explodes into an epic technological thriller. The story and its telling are original, although some of the soliloquies may remind readers of Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still.*

**** Blake Crouch, *Dark Matter,* Crown, $26.99. Jason Dessen is happy with his life. He loves his wife and teenage son, and enjoys his job as a college physics instructor. On his way home from having a drink with an old friend, Jason is abducted by a man in a Geisha mask. He wakes up in a different world, a parallel Earth on which he never married his college sweetheart and never had a son, but where he became a brilliantly successful quantum physicist. Trapped in a world where he doesn't belong, Jason fights against a startling adversary in an Escheresque race to get home. For a story with a five-dimensional plot line, the characters are disappointingly flat. But Crouch tells the story from Jason's point of view with raw, honest emotion, and the story itself is mind-bendingly clever.

**** Karen Hall, *Dark Debts,* Simon & Schuster, $26.00. Described variously as Southern Gothic and as a "theological thriller," *Dark Debts,* like many of the titles in this month's column, defies labels. A cynical Jesuit priest is exiled to Georgia for bucking authority. In Los Angeles, a successful novelist robs a convenience store and kills the clerk before jumping from a hotel window to his own death. His former girlfriend, not believing he could have committed these acts, travels to Georgia where she meets his former-outlaw brother. As their paths cross with that of the priest, the story morphs into a tale of demonic possession and exorcism. Hall approaches her characters and their theologies— or lack thereof—thoughtfully, through engaging debates among the characters. This book is an extensive revision of Hall's 1996 book of the same title. A producer and screenwriter whose credits include *The Good Wife, Hill Street Blues, Moonlighting,* and *Judging Amy,* this is her only novel to date.

**** Harlan Coben, *Fool Me Once,* Dutton, $28.00. Maya Stern had been a special-ops pilot in the Middle East until a fatal miscalculation led to her honorable discharge. Back in the States, two weeks after her husband is murdered before her eyes, her husband's face appears on a nanny-cam video, recorded after his death. Maya is convinced that she is either the victim of a hoax, or hallucinating as a result of post-traumatic stress. Coben

has employed this theme in several previous novels, but manages to put a fresh spin on it each time. Coben knows how to use sleight of hand to tell a tense and thrilling story with a satisfying twist.

**** Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini, *The Plague of Thieves Affair,* Forge, $25.99. In 1896 San Francisco, John Quincannon is investigating the theft of a formula from a brewery when he finds the body of the assistant brewmaster behind two locked doors. Meanwhile, Sabina Carpenter is providing security for an exhibit of antique reticules (ladies' handbags) when a bag that once belonged to Marie Antoinette is stolen under impossible conditions. The plotting is great fun, even if the solutions are obvious to those familiar with impossible crimes. Pronzini and Muller have also been busy with individual projects. Pronzini's *Zigzag* (Forge, $24.99) packages two Nameless Detective novellas and two short stories (both of which originally appeared in *EQMM)* into one volume, and *Someone Always Knows* (Grand Central Publishing, $26.00) is Muller's thirty-second novel in the groundbreaking Sharon McCone P.I. series.

*** Timothy Hallinan, *King Maybe,* Soho Crime, $25.95. Junior Bender is a Los Angeles burglar with a conscience who always finds himself working for the wrong people. In his fifth caper, he steals and then counterfeits a rare stamp. There are few things he hates more than climbing ropes, but he finds himself hanging by several. I was having difficulty keeping track of the plot until I realized that there wasn't one. Nevertheless, Hallinan has a proven track record for pleasing readers. His prose style is smart and spritely, filled with wry humor, but neither the humor nor the story left me completely satisfied.

**** Avram Noble Ludwig, *Shooting the Sphinx,* Forge, $26.99. When a Hollywood movie director travels to Egypt with the goal of filming aerial footage of the Sphinx, he finds himself in a Kafkaesque roller-coaster ride through bureaucratic hoops and corrupt red tape. The story is drawn directly from actual incidents that the author experienced while getting footage for two films in the Middle East. Despite a plot line that is more a series of escapades than a unified story, the writing is engaging and entertaining, the setting fascinating, and the storytelling ultimately satisfying.

**** Craig Johnson, *The Highwayman,* Viking. $20.00. Wyoming patrolwoman Rosey Wayman is a good cop, but Walt Longmire is concerned about her sanity. She is showing signs of psychosis, including her claims that she's receiving regular radio dispatches from a legendary Arapaho patrolman who died decades earlier. Johnson uses ghost stories, Native American legends and rituals, and his natural gift for storytelling in this touching, atmospheric police story. The Longmire television series now in its fifth season, author Craig Johnson keeps the books coming. His eleventh Longmire novel, *Dry Bones* (Viking, $16.00) is newly out in paperback, and

his next book, *An Obvious Fact,* will be published in September.

# Founding Editor at Work: Fred Dannay and EQMM

***by Francis M. Nevins*** | 3041 words

*Francis M. Nevins is the author of six novels and forty short stories. His critical works include two Edgar winners. His most recent book is* Ellery Queen: The Art of Detection.

Everyone familiar with *EQMM* knows that Fred Dannay founded and personally edited the magazine from Volume I Number 1 (Fall 1941) until shortly before his death in 1982. But what exactly did editing the magazine entail? What sort of work, month in and month out, occupied so many of Fred's days and nights from shortly before Pearl Harbor until early in the presidency of Ronald Reagan? Neither I nor anyone else has addressed this question until now. Luckily the raw materials available allow us to watch Fred at work over the decades. Shall we play flies on the wall?

In a letter of August 3, 1948 to his cousin and collaborator Manny Lee, who left the editing of the magazine to Fred, Fred boasts that in his role as editor he's "done one hell of a lot of rewriting" on the stories he's published, "including the best of them," and claims to "have improved many a story, as the original authors have... conceded." Certainly one of the finest authors to appear on a regular basis in early issues of *EQMM* was Dashiell Hammett. Did Fred have the chutzpah to rewrite a master like Hammett? You bet he did.

If you own a copy of the Library of America's Hammett volume *Crime Stories and Other Writings* (2001) and also a copy of the July 1945 *EQMM,* then, whether you know it or not, you have two different versions of Hammett's Continental Op story "The Tenth Clew" *(Black Mask,* February 1, 1924). The first difference between the two leaps out: The last word of the title is spelled "Clew" in both the *Black Mask* story and the Library of America collection, but Fred changed it to the more common "Clue"—which, funnily enough, is how it was spelled on the *Black Mask* cover. To appreciate the major difference between the two versions requires a little knowledge about the story's plot. Leopold Gantvoort, a fifty-seven-year-old widower whose net worth hovers around $1,500,000, is planning to marry a much younger woman, but he's murdered before the marriage can take place and also before he's signed a new will leaving half his fortune to her. The Op exposes her as a confidence woman and the murderer as her scam partner, who's been posing as her brother. Here are the last few sentences as Hammett

wrote them.

[W]ith her assistance it was no trick at all to gather up the rest of the evidence we needed to hang him. And I don't believe her enjoyment of her three-quarters of a million dollars is spoiled a bit by any qualms over what she did to [her partner]. She's a very respectable woman now, and glad to be free of the con man.

What's wrong here? Since Gantvoort was killed before either marrying the woman or changing his will, there's no way she could have inherited half his estate! Fred obviously caught this flub and spared Hammett some potential embarrassment by taking it upon himself to cut the last two sentences and end the story this way:

With her assistance it was no trick at all to gather up the rest of the evidence we needed to hang the man who left too many clues.

Soon after this tale appeared in *EQMM,* Fred included it in the digest-sized paperback-original collection *The Return of the Continental Op* (Jonathan Press pb #J17), which was published in the first week of July 1945, a month or two before Hammett came back to the U.S. from Army service in the Aleutian Islands during World War II. Two years later *Return* was reprinted in ordinary paperback format (Dell pb #154, 1947). In both versions the last paragraph of the story was unaccountably back in its original form. My best guess is that Hammett, or perhaps Lillian Hellman, who handled his affairs while he was in the military, had objected to Fred's bold attempt to spare Hammett a few blushes.

"Arson Plus" *(Black Mask,* October 1, 1923) was the earliest Continental Op story and for decades one of the rarest, revived only by Fred in *EQMM* for August 1951 and in the paperback collection *Woman in the Dark* (Jonathan Press pb #J59, 1951). Today, it's in the Library of America volume, and in Otto Penzler's mammoth *Black Lizard Big Book of Black Mask Stories* (2010), and can also be downloaded from the Web. When I compared the texts I made a discovery that startled but didn't surprise me. The Web version is identical with Fred's except for a few changes in punctuation and italics, but both are quite different from the Library of America version, which is faithful to what originally appeared in *Black Mask.* Fred believed that every story ever written was too long and therefore tended to trim the tales he reprinted. Some of the pieces he cut from "Arson Plus" were perhaps redundant, but he also axed part of the Op's explanation at the end of the story. Reprinting the tale in 1951, he must have felt a need to update some of the price references to reflect post-World War II inflation. At the beginning of the original version, the Op offers a cigar to the Sacramento

County sheriff, who guesses that it cost "fifteen cents straight." The Op corrects him, giving the price as two for a quarter. Fred raised these figures to "three for a buck" and "two bits each" respectively. He also added a cool ten thousand dollars to the purchase price of a house that in the 1923 version sold for $4,500. Where a Hammett character disposes of $4,000 in Liberty bonds (sold by the government to finance World War I), Fred has him sell $15,000 worth of common or gardenvariety bonds. Whenever Hammett refers to an automobile as a "machine," Fred changes it to "car." Where three men in a general store are "talking Hiram Johnson," Fred reduces them to "talking." (A note in the Library of America volume informs us that Johnson was governor of California between 1911 and 1917 and later served four terms as senator.) He also unaccountably changes a major character's name from Handerson to Henderson. Obviously, if you want to read Hammett's stories as he wrote them, you need the Library of America collection. This doesn't help with the eight Op stories not included in that volume, but it's a start.

T.S. Stribling (1881-1965) began his writing career in the pulps, turning out all sorts of stories of which the only ones remembered today are a group of five featuring criminologist Professor Henry Poggioli, first published in *Adventure* (1925-26) and collected in *Clues of the Caribbees* (1929). Then he graduated to gargantuan mainstream novels about the South such as *The Store* (1932), which won him the Pulitzer Prize, but he continued to keep Poggioli alive in a second cycle of stories for *Adventure* and other pulps. By the late 1930s Stribling's place as America's premier Southern novelist had been taken over by William Faulkner and he found it next to impossible to get anything published—except in *EQMM.* Fred Dannay included a tale from the second Poggioli cycle in Volume I Number 1 of the magazine (Fall 1941). A few years later he got into correspondence with Stribling, who was then living in Florida, and urged him to revive the character in a new series of stories. Stribling did just that, sending in a tale he called "The Sock." Fred returned it with a covering letter in which he apologized for having rejected a story he had encouraged Stribling to write. Stribling replied on April 24, 1944: "The idea that you have 'failed me' is perfectly absurd.... If I didn't write what you wanted, I don't at all blame you for not taking it." Fred wrote back on April 29 and they discussed the story at length. On May 18 Stribling sent in a substantially revised version. Six days later, Fred sent a letter of acceptance. Well, sort of. "I think the story needs one important change.... Rather than try to explain the change I suggest, I have retyped the last five or six pages of the story, incorporating the change. I am sure that after you've read the enclosed pages you'll agree that the change both clarifies and strengthens the whole story.... [A]s soon as I hear from you, I'll put through a purchase order so that you can receive your check without delay."

Along with the other changes Fred had "added a short paragraph at the very end of the story... [which] points up the climactic idea for those magazine readers who need an explicit 'tag.'" How many editors would have rewritten so much of a story for an author? Stribling altered a few words in Fred's revisions but was otherwise satisfied, and the unacknowledged collaboration was published as "The Mystery of the Sock and the Clock" *(EQMM,* January 1946). Readers who want to check out that last paragraph, and the rest of the tale to boot, can most readily find it in the Stribling collection *Best Dr. Poggioli Detective Stories* (1975).

The so-called Once-in-a-Lifetime issue of *EQMM* (April 1951) contained just eight stories, their authors ranked by a Gallup poll as the best mystery writers of all time. Fred designed this issue to the specifications of prestidigitator Richard Himber, to serve as a prop in one of Himber's magic tricks. After copies were handed out, Himber would ask a member of the audience to turn to the first page of any story and add the digits of that page number, so that page 53 would yield an 8, page 94 a 13, and so on. When the subject identified the eighth or thirteenth word on that page, whatever the number might be, Himber would instantly identify the word. How could he do that? Because Fred had doctored the texts of the issue's eight stories so that the same word, "problems," was on the first page of each in its appropriate spot. Obviously, the trick could only be used once in each performance or the audience would catch on. I doubt that any other issue of any magazine was ever edited as that one was edited!

Vincent Cornier (1898-1976) was an Englishman of French descent who inherited a neat pile of money as a young man and thereafter devoted himself to writing short stories of fantasy and mystery. Very few of them were published in the U.S. until, after World War II, Fred discovered his work in old British periodicals and began reprinting occasional Cornier stories in *EQMM.* Eventually Cornier began to send him a few more recent tales. For me the most intriguing of these is "O Time, In Your Flight" *(EQMM,* September 1951). Why? Because it contains a uniquely beautiful clue to the solution: one that is available only to readers who recognize the title's poetic source and remember the three words in the poem that come just before the five in the title. The question all but asks itself: Was it Cornier or Fred who put that brilliant title on the story? Their correspondence, which is archived at Columbia University, doesn't indicate what title was on the tale when Cornier submitted it, but we know Fred's penchant for changing the titles of many of the stories he published. Thanks to the invaluable FictionMags Index Web site, we also know that the tale was published in England as "The Masterpiece" *(London Evening Standard,* August 16, 1951) and, in an earlier version without Cornier's series character Barnabas

Hildreth, as "The Time Test" *(Pearson's Magazine,* November 1935). All this is further evidence that the *EQMM* title was Fred's. Want more? I find nothing in Cornier's other stories that indicates he had any particular interest in poetry, while Fred not only collected rare first editions of poetry but also wrote some of his own. It seems to me far more likely than not that the stroke of genius was Fred's. If further proof is needed, we have indisputable evidence that Fred knew the poem in question since he used the first three words of that line, the words that provide the clue to Cornier's story, as the title for another tale by another author that appeared in *EQMM* a few years later. The author was the late Dorothy Salisbury Davis, the issue June 1954. After you've read "O Time, In Your Flight" in the Cornier collection *The Duel of Shadows* (Crippen & Landru, 2011), Google the title and you'll quickly find what I've been hinting at without, I hope, having given it away.

A number of years ago I visited Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where Fred's papers are archived, looking into whether he had saved anything Cornell Woolrich had written to him of which I wasn't already aware. My most interesting find was a brief undated note that accompanied what turned out to be the last story of the man I've called the Hitchcock of the written word. "Just consider it on its merits, like you always have all stories," Woolrich wrote. "Don't feel sorry; I've had it better than most guys. I'd like one last publication, before I kiss it off. I'm a writer to the end. And glad I was one." The story accompanying this note was "New York Blues," which Fred purchased in May or June of 1967 but didn't publish in *EQMM* until the December 1970 issue, more than two years after Woolrich's death. Its storyline is thin to the point of nonexistence and at the same time pure noir. A nameless man who's killed the woman he loves, or thinks he killed her, or perhaps killed no one, sits in the dark of a room on the second floor of a New York hotel—clearly the Sheraton-Russell, on Park Avenue and 37th, in a suite like the one in which Woolrich spent his final months—and looks out at the night and waits in terror for the Them who are death personified to take him. There's a penciled note on Woolrich's covering letter which seems to be in Fred's handwriting and suggests an alternate title for the story, one I personally like better than Woolrich's: "The Last Hours." In the end, Fred went with Woolrich's title.

Edward D. Hoch (1930-2008) was by far the most prolific contributor to *EQMM,* with more than 500 stories published in its pages. If only he were still alive, I'm sure he could fill a book with tales of Fred the editor. I don't recall his ever speaking with me on the subject, but Fred once did. At the beginning of the 1970s one of them decided that some of Ed's *EQMM* work should appear under a pseudonym. It was Fred, I suspect, who decided on R.L. Stevens. The byline, with its obvious evocation of Robert Louis

Stevenson, made sense because Ed's then latest submission, "The Physician and the Opium Fiend" (July 1971), was set in Victorian London. The only problem was that the story lacked the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere that Fred felt it needed. What did he do? He simply pulled down his copy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and inserted appropriate words and phrases into the story, which is full of un-Hoch-like sentences. ("He had broken into ten of them [doctors' offices] in the past fortnight, but only two had yielded a quantity of opium sufficient to ease his terrible burthen.") If anyone is wondering whether Fred committed a copyright violation, the answer is of course not: Stevenson has long been in the public domain.

Though as a relative newcomer to *EQMM's* pages I might easily have found Fred editing me with a heavy hand, actually I can recall very few instances. Dozens if not hundreds of contributors have had their titles changed, but most of my early efforts appeared under the titles I had given them: "Open Letter to Survivors," "After the Twelfth Chapter," "Leap Day," and the like. Perhaps having read the magazine for a dozen years or so had given me a sense of the kind of titles Fred favored. I do remember that one of my early Loren Mensing stories, which was a bit of a takeoff on Conan Doyle's "The Six Napoleons," was sent in as "Six Thousand Little Corsicans." Fred bought the story but, believing that many readers wouldn't remember that Napoleon had been born on the island of Corsica, changed the title to "Six Thousand Little Bonapartes." If there was a prime directive for him as editor, that was it: Always Keep Your Reader in Mind.

In 1978, about six years after I had begun to sell to the magazine, chance tossed into my lap an opportunity to apply that lesson and, in a very real sense, to channel Fred. I was in Florida at a conference when one morning during a break I was approached by two young professors who, knowing I was close to Fred, asked me to take a look at a story of theirs that he had recently rejected and, if I could, to tell them why. I must have been in a good mood that morning, and anyway the story was quite short. It was about a young working-class man who was able to attend college only by holding down various campus construction jobs. Thanks to nonstop work on a new building he hadn't had time to do his reading for a literature class, which dealt with Poe, and for much of the story the professor belittled and ridiculed him without mercy. At the end he comes to class and the professor never shows up. Obviously the reader is meant to infer that the student had finally gotten around to reading "The Cask of Amontillado" and had walled up the prof inside the new building. But, I asked myself, putting myself in Fred's editorial shoes as best I could, what if a reader had never heard of or had forgotten "The Cask"? In that case, the story about the student and the prof would be gibberish. (But was I right? If so, in dealing with Ed Hoch's story, why hadn't Fred been bothered about readers who might never have

heard of Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll?) At the next break I reported back to the authors, who in due course rewrote their tale and sold it elsewhere, and later made several sales to *EQMM.* I do believe they were prudent enough to keep their day jobs.

Fred Dannay was the closest to a grandfather I've ever known. I never actually saw him do editorial work, but as to how he went about it abundant evidence survives. Will there ever be another like him?

# Ellery Queen's Other Half: Manfred B. Lee in His Own Words

***by Rand B. Lee*** | 1464 words

*Rand B. Lee is the youngest surviving son of Manfred B. Lee and the author of* The Green Man and Other Stories *(Curiosity Quills Press).*

Creative partnerships are frequently fraught with drama and contention, and the Ellery Queen collaboration of my father, Manfred B. Lee, and our cousin, Frederic Dannay, illustrates this in spades. When I was a boy living with my parents in Connecticut, I frequently overheard Manny and Danny (as the grownups in our family called them) slugging it out in a conference call, and their surviving letters make clear the competitiveness and insecurity that characterized much of their relationship.

Yet here we are, decades after their deaths, celebrating the continued existence of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* which—along with the EQ novels, short stories, and radio scripts—could not have existed without both of them. It's a point worth emphasizing, because although through much of their joint career Danny did most of the Queen fiction's plotting and Manny did most of the actual writing, Danny was always the more publicly visible of the two partners. His preeminence was particularly noticeable in the years following my father's death in 1971.

Both cousins were born 111 years ago to Jewish immigrant families that differed greatly in fortunes and social status. Danny started life as Daniel Nathan (hence his nickname), and grew up in a middle-class home in western New York State. His editorial work on *EQMM* and the various Queen mystery anthologies brought him into frequent contact with the literary community. By contrast, Manny, whose birth name was Emanuel Benjamin Lepofsky, was born to a Brooklyn family so poor they couldn't afford a pew in the local synagogue. The shame and anxiety born of his childhood poverty dogged my father all of his life, and may have contributed to the frequent depressions that turned him, ultimately, into a virtual recluse on our Connecticut homestead.

Anti-Semitism wounded him too. In the 1920s Manny graduated summa cum laude in English from the Greenwich Village campus of New York University, but when he told a Gentile faculty "friend" that his dream was to become a university English professor, the man said, "Oh, Manny, no Jew will ever get tenure in the NYU system. Jews are so smart, you see, it wouldn't be fair to the rest of us." It was shortly after this incident that my father

changed his name from Emanuel Lepofsky to Manfred Bennington Lee, the most Gentile equivalent he could think of and still keep his nickname. (Not long after, Daniel Nathan became Frederic Dannay, and my father's parents and sisters abandoned Lepofsky in favor of the surname Lee.) Manny abandoned his dreams of professorship and went into advertising at the same agency where Danny worked.

As painful as these experiences were for my father, without them Ellery Queen—and this magazine—may never have existed. For it was while the cousins were employed at the New York ad agency that they heard of the *McClure's Magazine* contest for best new mystery novel by a first-time writer. They invented the moniker "Ellery Queen" and decided (with marketing in mind) to use it both for their main character and their pseudonym. Their first Queen novel, *The Roman Hat Mystery,* won the prize, and the cousins bought one another Dunhill pipes in celebration. Their jubilation was dampened when *McClure's* was bought by a women's publishing house and the prize was awarded to another writer, but Frederic A. Stokes Publishing Company picked up *Roman Hat,* and it did well enough that the cousins were encouraged to write a second book, *The French Powder Mystery.* By their fifth collaboration they had quit their ad-agency jobs and were devoting themselves to writing Ellery Queen full-time.

*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* figures prominently in the cousins' surviving correspondence. Although the idea for *EQMM* was born of Danny's extensive knowledge of the history of detective fiction and his comprehensive library of works in the genre, both cousins were initially equally enthusiastic about it. But questions concerning divisions of labor, money, literary tastes, and Danny's increasing sense of editorial proprietorship over the magazine began to leave my (admittedly insecure) father feeling slighted and underappreciated. "I am less and less a part of Queen as far as the outside world is concerned," Manny wrote in the 1940s.

This latter issue came to a head in a letter dated January 17, 1950, written by my father from California to *EQMM* New York staffer John Stuart Mills. "Some time ago," Manny wrote, "I received a letter from a lady in Connecticut, unknown to me, who... had some manuscripts which she wished to submit to *EQMM...* In my reply I explained that my partner-in-Queen, Dannay, was handling the magazine end of our enterprises and I suggested that she send her manuscripts directly to him. Today I received a note from her written on the back of a letter to her signed with your name. Your letter to her began: `Mr. Dannay (Ellery Queen) turned over your manuscripts to me... and on the basis of my report has asked me to return the stories to you...'"

My father proceeded to take Mills to task: "Mr. Dannay and Ellery Queen are not exclusively synonymous, and it becomes an uncomfortable necessity to make that clear, to you and to anyone else at *EQMM* who may be under

the impression or who may be giving the impression, advertently or inadvertently, that they *are* exclusively synonymous. After so many years of common proprietorship in Queen, so well-publicized and documented in so many publications, I am struck with specially unpleasant force by the appearance of this sort of thing in a publication bearing the name of Ellery Queen. I am tempted to quote Matthew on the subject of prophets in their own houses. But frankly, I am not in a quotational mood."

Despite his jealousy of Danny, my father admired his editorial skill, and was very proud of the quality of the stories that appeared in *EQMM.* To a letter written in March of 1950, Manny attaches his analysis of forty-six stories that appeared in the first four issues of the magazine, and lauds Danny as having done "wonders" with *EQMM* thus far. "There is nothing so deadly in a magazine as sameness," Manny observes. "That's why I can't read most slick magazines; the identical slant is too monotonous. I think most people of intelligence feel the same way, and I think most people who read *EQMM* regularly are people of intelligence... by including one of every broad type in each issue, wherever possible, you are catering to the widest possible range of tastes—consequently attracting the widest possible audience."

And that audience was changing: The postwar economy and the wider availability of television were beginning to affect *EQMM's* revenues. "(The) mysterious falling-off of the Nov.-Dec.-Jan. issues may be—probably is—considerably more a reflection of the times than of any internal errors or defections," Manny writes. "Unemployment, I note, is now almost at the 5,000,000 mark, and is steadily rising... I think, farfetched as it may seem at first glance, that the rise of television has a lot to do with it. More and more people are spending their recreation hours at a television receiver. It has notoriously hurt the motion-picture industry. The book business must also be seriously affected. I see no reason why it should not also be true of magazines, especially entertainment magazines."

Potential readers' budgets, Manny adds, are tight enough so that, between time-payments on their new TV sets and the high cost of living, "there is nothing left over for such relative 'luxuries' as books and magazines. This is not true of your aficionados, who will buy the magazine steadily. But they constitute the small minority. Your big sales come from Joe Dokes, and Dokes will buy only when the magazine offers him something he simply can't resist." In my father's stated opinion, the average reader was no longer interested in the classic mystery writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Georges Simenon, and Arthur Conan Doyle; tastes had shifted toward the work of tough-guy writers such as Cornell Woolrich and Dashiell Hammett. "It is apparent," writes Manny, "that what is really lacking in the magazine is a fertile source of good 'modern' stuff of the hardboiled or semi-hardboiled school." My father would be pleased, I think, that mystery readers today

once again appreciate the "Golden Age" writers who by and large were Manny and Danny's contemporaries.

Manny closes the letter with unqualified praise of Danny's editorial efforts: "That you have raised the prestige and dignity of the detective story is already evident to me in the few issues [of *EQMM]* I have read. The fact that the magazine has lasted for so many years, while imitators and others have fallen by the roadside, in itself is proof that the achievement has found sympathy and support from at least enough readers to keep the venture alive and more than alive..."

And thanks to all of the *EQMM* staff, the folks at Dell Magazines, and you, our faithful readers, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* lives and thrives to this day.

# She Did It Her Way

## In Memory of Eleanor Regis Sullivan, 1929-1991

***by Eleanor J. Sullivan*** | 2350 words

*Eleanor J. Sullivan is the award-winning author of the Monika Everhart medical mysteries. Her current series, the Singular Village Mysteries, set in the 19th century Ohio settlement of her ancestors, has a new entry,* Tree of Heaven *, due out in 2017.*

When she interviewed with Fred Dannay for the position of managing editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* Eleanor Regis Sullivan probably didn't know how many writers' lives and careers she'd affect or how she would influence the mystery-fiction field. In fact, she didn't know if she'd even get the job. Although she wasn't new to editorial work—she'd been a fiction editor at Scribner's—she admitted she had no magazine experience.

But when Fred asked her, "How good are you at taking instructions?"

Her answer, "I went to parochial school," got her the job.

The year was 1970. She would go on to become editor-in-chief upon Fred Dannay's death in 1980 and continue in that position until her own untimely death in 1991.

Born the fifth of six children, Eleanor's education followed the traditional path for young women in the 1940s. She graduated from St. Paul's Elementary School in 1942 and Cambridge High and Latin School in 1946. Eleanor's brother, George, younger by five years, credits this high school with challenging its students to excellence, and both he and his sister did the school credit. He became a journalist with the Boston Red Sox and later the *Boston Globe,* and though she was the older sister, Eleanor followed him into writing.

In fact, when he was hired by the *Cambridge Chronicle* to write about sports, Eleanor was amused, George recalls. If her baby brother could do it, maybe she could too. Having graduated from Salem State College with a degree in education, she was teaching elementary school at the time. She figured she could write while still teaching school. Penning a TV column for the *Cambridge Chronicle,* Eleanor began her writing career.

The more she wrote for the *Chronicle,* the more she enjoyed it. Finally, her appetite whetted for writing, Eleanor told her family she planned to move to New York to become an editor and do some writing as well. Working in the industry in New York, her brother warned her, was very different from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Eleanor was undeterred. She relinquished her teaching job, moved to White Plains, New York, secured a teaching job, and pursued her dream to work in publishing. Almost immediately she was hired by Bantam Books, the number-one publisher of mass-market books, editing fiction for the next two years. Then, in 1960, with some editing experience behind her, Eleanor gave up her teaching job in White Plains and moved to New York City to seek a full-time editorial position with a major publisher.

"She showed a lot of guts," her brother George reports. "She gave up a very good job to follow her dream."

I never met Eleanor. Never having read *EQMM* (more's the pity), I'd never heard her name. It wasn't until I'd written my first mystery that I came face to face with our names' similarity.

"You can't use that name!" a man said, pointing to my Bouchercon name tag.

"But it's my name," I argued.

With a disbelieving snort, he barked out a quick explanation: Eleanor Sullivan was the name of the much-beloved editor of *EQMM* who had died ten years before. Then he stomped off.

I could only offer my silent sympathy.

That wasn't the only time our names were confused.

An e-mail from Jon Breen (I didn't know who he was either at the time) informed me that Carroll & Graf had recently reissued an anthology Eleanor had edited, titled *50 Best Mysteries,* saying she was the now-deceased former editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and the "author of the classic mystery novel *Twice Dead." Twice Dead* is the title of my first mystery. A visit to New York and a meeting with the managing editor of Carroll & Graf followed and an amicable agreement was reached. They'd correct the author attribution on their Web site, and no recall of books would be necessary.

Over the years, I often heard from mystery writers who told me how she'd helped them launch their careers as writers, what a delightful person she was, and how professional her work was. But time was passing. She'd died in 1991 and already some of the writers she'd supported had retired or died.

After publishing my fifth mystery, I decided that it was time for me to write a tribute to her. I didn't have a publication in mind; it just seemed like I was the right (no pun intended) person to do so. Serendipity intervened. I met Janet Hutchings at the Agents and Editors party before the 2014 Edgars and shared my idea. She told me that the magazine was celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2016 and encouraged me to submit an article about Eleanor for an issue.

Eleanor's working relationship with Fred was unique. Although he was editor-

in-chief of the magazine, he never left his home in Larchmont, New York. During their early years of working together, Fred tutored his novice managing editor with numerous phone calls. They soon fell into a routine, albeit a strange one. Every afternoon, Eleanor prepared a package of the stories that had arrived that day, attached her comments on the back of each, and mailed the packet to Fred's home. Fred would read each submission but didn't look at Eleanor's comments until he'd formed his opinion, which he shared with her by phone.

This arrangement continued from her hire as managing editor in 1970 until 1980 when Fred, now seventy-five years old, turned over most of the work to Eleanor, although his title as editor remained on the masthead until his death in 1982. Eleanor's name as editor-in-chief graced the January 1983 masthead of *EQMM;* Fred's name had disappeared.

During the years they worked together, Eleanor submitted her own short stories to Fred. Unwilling to use undue influence on him, she submitted them using a pseudonym. He might feel compelled to accept her story, she told her brother, George, but she wanted her work to be judged on its merits. "That shows you the kind of person she was," George said. Writer Francis Nevins can imagine her "chortling in her joy" when Fred accepted her story. Of course, each time she submitted a story, she had to use a different name since he'd known her previous one. Her pseudonyms included Lika Van Ness, Julia DeHahn, and Ruth Graviros.

The writers she edited are legendary and include Stanley Ellin, Donald E. Westlake, Patricia Highsmith, Edward D. Hoch, John Lutz, Francis M. Nevins, Robert Randisi, and Ruth Rendell, to name a few. She never hesitated to contact writers of mystery novels to suggest that they submit a short story to *EQMM,* and became close friends with many, including Ruth Rendell, who dedicated a mystery novel to her.

"Eleanor was a consummate professional, always on time with deadlines," said literary agent and close friend Cynthia Manson. Josh Pachter remembers her fondly. He was a new high-school graduate when she started publishing his work. "She was always welcoming," he said, when he'd stop by the office. They'd go to lunch, to her apartment in Alphabet City, talk, and have dinner together. "One time my dad bought me a winter coat from Barney's Boys Town. It was long, furry, and brown. She wanted to try it on. I let her. Then she wore it to lunch; I was freezing. She always asked about the coat, pretending disappointment if it was too warm to wear it."

Jon Breen is a longtime fan of Eleanor's work. "I knew Eleanor had Fred's trust and confidence when I had a three-way phone conversation with them at the time I was taking over (at that time everyone hoped temporarily) the Jury Box column for the gravely ill John Dickson Carr. At one point Fred made a statement about something or other related to the makeup of the magazine, an issue of whether something could fit in a given space. He

thought it couldn't; she said she could make it happen and he told her if she thought it could, she should go ahead." Interestingly, Eleanor herself recalled that whenever she told Fred about a layout problem that she thought could not be solved, he could visualize the solution and tell her how to fix it.

"Generous and gracious in dealing with potentially contentious matters, whether editorial or financial, she was also an excellent hands-on editor," adds Breen. "Many of the stories I've sold in the last couple of decades have required little or no tinkering or revision, and I came to think I always knew what I was doing the first time around. In reading her letters, I saw how much of a contribution she made to some stories I falsely remembered as being in finished form when I sent them in."

The late Ed Hoch was another admirer. The most-published author in the annals of *EQMM,* Ed published more than 500 stories in the magazine over the years. Between May 1973 and May 2007, a new story by Ed Hoch appeared in every monthly issue of *EQMM.* He had gone an amazing thirtyfour years without missing an issue.

In addition to writing mysteries, science fiction, and horror, Ed also wrote Western whodunits. One series featured protagonist Ben Snow. Ed credits Eleanor with naming Ben's horse. Because she knew how much he admired Joyce Carol Oates, she dubbed him "Oats." Ed and his wife Pat became dear friends of Eleanor's also.

Editing *EQMM* and writing short stories were only part of Eleanor's work during those busy years. In 1975 she took over as editor of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and continued to work on both magazines until 1981. She also authored *Whodunit: A Biblio-Bio-Anecdotal Memoir of Frederic Dannay,* a jigsaw-puzzle mystery, a short story with an eleven-year-old coauthor, and various nonfiction pieces.

"She loved getting 'her writers' together for lunch," reports Pat Hoch. John Lutz recalls a time when a group of them piled into a Checker cab. Seeing all the seats filled, Eleanor just "scrambled onto my lap!" John says.

She was active in the greater mystery-writing community as well, serving on the Mystery Writers of America board of directors from 1974 to 1977 and again from 1982 to 1985. The writing community reciprocated. She was honored with the Ellery Queen Award in 1987.

When *EQMM's* publisher, Joel Davis, proposed that Isaac Asimov create and edit a science-fiction magazine, he recommended that Asimov approach Eleanor for help. She graciously accepted, helping him set up the system for handling manuscripts and dealing with the typesetter. In a 2005 editorial in *Asimov's Science Fiction,* editor Sheila Williams, another Eleanor admirer, states that "without an Eleanor Sullivan, there is no *Asimov's."* Isaac Asimov became a friend and he, too, dedicated a book to her.

Over the years, she edited numerous anthologies chosen from stories published in *EQMM.* To honor the occasion when the magazine turned fifty in

1991, Eleanor selected short stories from each decade of the magazine's publication for an anthology, *50 Years of the Best from Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.* It was this book's reprinting in 2004 with the back-cover addition noting her "classic mystery novel" that brought Jon Breen's attention to my book. And led me to her work.

Eleanor led a rich social life as well, gathering friends wherever she went. Her neighbor was Katharine Hepburn, and friends included film critic Judith Crist, comedienne Phyllis Diller, and actress Loretta Swit, among many others. She never hesitated to write to celebrities if she thought they needed her advice. A letter to Oscar Hammerstein brought this response: "I'll take that under consideration."

Her large extended family also played an important role in her life. Two nieces, Anne Powers and Ellen Ford, remember her with admiration and affection. "She treated us as if we were adults," Ellen recalls.

Eleanor was the cool aunt who lived in the exciting world of Manhattan. Her apartment reflected her individuality, its walls covered with black-and-white pictures, framed *New Yorker* cartoons, and music scores. Always generous, she gave up her apartment for family members to stay in for the 1964 World's Fair.

She related to each person in a different way, asking provoking questions. "She was a great audience," said Ellen.

"Around your birthday, some kooky gift would arrive," Anne explained. "It might be a kazoo or rose-colored glasses, but the gift was unique to us."

No matter how busy she was, Eleanor always had time for a niece's visit. Taking the train to New York City on weekends was a highlight for them. They'd sit around, go out to lunch, or go to a movie. When she came to Dorchester, everyone vied to go to the station to pick her up.

"She was a great cook too," reports Anne, who once asked her aunt for copies of a couple of her favorite recipes. Six months later Anne received a 150-page book of recipes with handwritten notes, what to serve with each dish, when she'd made it, and who had attended the dinner party.

"It was her smile," said Ellen, "and her laugh—infectious—and her goofy sense of humor."

Both girls wanted to be like her. Or be her.

Eleanor Regis Sullivan lived life her way. Courageous and unconventional, she eschewed a traditional lifestyle for an independence that was years ahead of her time. Tall, blond, and beautiful, she often dressed in black. John Lutz remembers that she always wore the same black dress every year to the Edgars. Despite her striking beauty, she bothered little about her appearance, always appearing a bit disheveled. But her casual attire belied her professionalism. That she was in charge was never in doubt.

During her long career, Eleanor garnered and nurtured some of the world's best mystery writers, which is not surprising given her intellect, tenacity, and enthusiasm. That she did so without ego in a world of outsize egos is all the more impressive.

Conscientious even in the face of her illness, she nonetheless reached out to Walker Books editor Janet Hutchings to solicit her interest in shepherding the magazine into the future. Fortunately, after a delay, Janet responded and continues the fine tradition of *EQMM's* excellence today.

When the history of mystery fiction is written, Eleanor Regis Sullivan will take her rightful place alongside the greats, Fred Dannay included.

I have been privileged to write this tribute to an extraordinary woman.

Without exception, every person I interviewed lauded her work, her character, and her delightful and charming personality.

I only wish I had met her.

# A VISITOR IN WINTER

## DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

***by Julie McNeely-Kirwan*** | 7043 words

**Julie McNeely-Kirwan's day jobs have ranged from paralegal to assistant editor of a gambling newsletter, including a stint as a litigation investigator; she is currently employed as an analyst. She was born and raised in Phoenix, but has lived in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Madison, Wisconsin, among other places. You wouldn't guess from this story set outside a small town that her life has featured so many different places and occupations; she evokes her remote setting very effectively.**

The school bus emptied child by child until only Susie and the new driver were left to rattle along the unpaved road. Mr. Ratner was outlined against the windshield, surrounded by a halo of late-afternoon sunlight. Not much bigger than a child himself, he was leaning forward intently over the steering wheel, watching for deer. It was early in the season and the forests around town were thick with animals fleeing beer-brave weekend hunters. More than once in the last week a deer had run directly in front of the bus, trying to escape death at the hands of shoe salesmen and patent lawyers.

Past Hardin, a large deer stood at the side of the road, cautiously watching as the bus drove by. Wordlessly, Susie wished the animal luck.

For herself, she asked for more weeks of winter, and she thought that particular wish might prosper. The air was leaden with a coming storm. Susie didn't glory in much, but she gloried in winter with its whites and grays, and in the way dark blue water coursed under the ice that topped the creeks. She loved the way the season seemed to hold everything down and make it

quieter.

A muffled shot rang out in the distance, then another. Birds who'd been huddled together on a long branch took flight. The girl wondered idly what, or who, had been shot.

"Eight," her father guessed this year. It was the game of a serious man, played because he despised the weekenders with their new Christmas rifles.

"No. Ten. Maybe eleven. Weather's warmer. Lazy ones come out."

They were betting on the season's tally. Not for deer, but for deer hunters. Each year an unlucky few ended up prey to their own carelessness or someone else's. Susie's mother found the game ghoulish, the more so because her daughter was right on the nose last year and pleased to take her father's dollar.

"It is her nature," her father said calmly. "She's analytical."

"Analytical? Like you're analytical?" Her mother said it under her breath. Not that she didn't mean to be heard.

Her father drummed his fingers on the kitchen table. It got louder and louder. Suddenly Susie was holding her breath.

Her mother stared, unmoved.

Her father stopped drumming. Shrugged.

"It's really better if she gets it right, isn't it, Marybeth? She needs to understand."

Her father didn't say much of anything anymore, didn't ask any questions or muse on how it felt to be under a slit feline gaze. A nameless disease was rendering him immobile, and now only his ice-blue eyes lived in what had always been an inordinately still face. Susie thought her father's natural stillness, once confined, had spread like a malignancy throughout his body, until he couldn't do anything but gaze in contempt at his doctors.

Up to a month or two ago, she'd hoped a hunt could be arranged, so they could bring down an animal together. She was old enough, he'd whispered, for real hunting. Not for deer, who could only run. For the others. Maybe the two of them could go after a grizzly, half a ton or more of appetite and cunning. Or for big cats, who sometimes fixed their considering eyes on human beings. There were old and canny beasts hereabouts, monsters who'd taken dogs, maybe more.

"I was on a particular hunt down by the quarry, with someone I knew. Cut my eyes sideways and there it was. Puma. Top percentile. Mature male. Ready to come down off a branch right on top of me. Barely got in a shot. Missed, but it ran him off. Seemed to. But I felt eyes on me. Walked backward most of the two miles to the truck."

"The cat followed you?"

"Maybe. Something did." He frowned, considering that long-ago hunt.

What could be better than a monster hunt? But in the following weeks the quieting of her father's body spread and accelerated.

As the school year began, and the disease progressed, her father got a bee in his bonnet. Or that was how Susie's mother put it. He'd glare, his lips forming around words that never came, or pluck at a pen, unable to get a firm grasp. Sometimes he seemed to nod when Susie tried using the Ouija board, the one Susie's mother didn't appreciate having in the house. But she couldn't be sure of the results. Once he seemed to nod out "too many" as she plodded through the letters, but the phrase held no meaning for her.

With nothing more to be done, Susie's mother decided to do it in an official setting under the direct supervision of trained professionals who could also do nothing. The nothing they did required bags of fluid and needles and psychological evaluations intended to explain why a completely paralyzed man might have decided to stop eating. This was all being done in a hospital several towns away, leaving Susie alone, but not in the least lonely. Susie's mother, the second of a brood of ten, was neither overly sentimental about children nor prone to fretting about her daughter's morals. She willingly left her competent child to tend the house while the horses were looked after in one of the local commercial barns.

As far as Susie could tell, her father was wholly unwilling and wholly unable to do anything about it. It seemed more as if he were being dragged off for treatment because he could no longer resist it.

Knowing one of them might not come home, Susie saw her parents off on the porch. It seemed to be expected. It was what other people did. In the end, with her mother hovering, Susie found there wasn't much to say.

"Mom left money. I'll get a new cleaning rod at the Walmart."

A fractional lowering of his eyelids seemed to convey something like approval. The old rod, used for cleaning his prized rifle, needed to be replaced.

Susiex's mother waited a few seconds more and walked away, muttering about warming up the Tahoe.

No breeze blew, and for a space of time there was only the steady dripping from the trees as ice melted under the morning sun. Left alone so the car could be fetched, or to give them some privacy, Susie sat on a footstool and waited, her mind blank. Then her father's open mouth began moving, his teeth weakly nipping at the air like a marionette's. Susie felt as if she were standing back, watching a girl on the porch watch an unknown creature in its death throes.

To her shock, he began to make noises, something he'd been unable to do for weeks.

"Caaan!" Distantly, she was aware of shaking her head.

"Caaannu!" Susie looked away, her head down, shamed for him.

Not that he cared. Taking a breath he tried again.

"Cacan Oh. Cacano."

It was enough, finally enough. She raised her head, her face marked by

comprehension and bewilderment in equal parts.

"Carcano. Carcano. Yes. I understand."

This wasn't strictly true, although the word was clear enough. It referred to one of a thousand little secrets kept from Susie's mother. Why this might be the last word Susie ever heard from her father was hard to say. Maybe it was random. Maybe as he went on dying everything meant less and less until it finally meant nothing. That's what he would say.

The SUV swung round next to the porch and in a hundred careful steps her mother loaded her speechless husband into the passenger's seat, and stowed the chair, talking to him as if he were not inert. Finished, the car's heater on for her husband, she came back on the porch and stood waiting in front of Susie's footstool. She waited a minute, two, until Susie couldn't stand it anymore and rose up to stare fixedly at her mother's right eyebrow.

By way of goodbye her mother touched a single finger lightly to the bridge of Susie's nose. Solemnly, she spoke the rules.

"No visitors. Absolutely no boys. You can go to the girls' houses. Nobody — nobody, comes here. Not with us gone. Call Travis's mom if the pipes freeze."

Then she leaned forward and lightly kissed Susie, who was shocked into a stillness that mimicked her father's.

Her mother sprang quickly away, getting behind the wheel, and the SUV entered the woods and was gone in thirty seconds.

It had been good to see them leave. Susie stood and watched and was glad. Now she could sleep through the night without the distraction of her mother's three A.M. pacing. Could wake without the sight of her shrunken father, smaller and more diminished by every breakfast. It felt as if the winter were all hers.

Today, Susie was also glad to have seen the back of Travis, who'd left the bus a couple of stops ago. Travis lived two farms away. Lately, he kept staring at her newly-visible boobs with an admiration she could not begin to fathom. In her view, breasts should be stowed away in a training bra until they were needed for the cowlike function that would ensure the good health of another generation of Newlands, or whatever her children would be called. After that, they could melt away for all she cared. Feeling a touch vengeful, Susie decided she might marry Travis and never ever let him even *see* her boobs.

The bus rolled to a stop, Mr. Ratner remaining stiff in his seat. The old bus driver used to announce "End of the line! Newland Farm!"—as if Susie needed to be reminded of where she lived on a daily basis. During this, his first week, Mr. Ratner had just stopped the bus and nodded in a shy way as she got off in front of the long driveway.

Today was different.

"Be careful," said Mr. Ratner, unexpectedly. "Mind your doors." He sounded

like a child repeating what he'd been told by an insistent adult. He stared out through the windshield, as if unable to look her in the eye.

Susie nodded back and hopped off the bus, wondering what he meant. The overheard words of her English teacher rose up. Mrs. Vick often gossiped with her aide over cans of tea, unaware that Susie, seemingly intent on a book, was all ears.

"I guess he can *drive.* Not much traffic is there?" He'd been drowned, said Mrs. Vick, three-quarters drowned, when he was seventeen. Had never gone off to college and never would. The quarry, of course. Probably been trying to save his cousin, one of those kids they never found.

"The quarry keeps 'em," said the aide, sagely. It was a local saying, the motto for most local tragedies.

The driveway ran for half its considerable length through thick forest, then came to a wide, snowy clearing on which sat the elderly Newland house. The twostory house had been various colors at various times and was now a utilitarian white that barely stood out against the snow. There was a single broad tree next to the porch, leafless and stark. Reaching the clearing, Susie realized there'd been no roar of a departing diesel engine and that she could feel eyes on her.

Behind her, seen in a quick glance, were the woods and movement among the trees. Maybe a deer, maybe the one from Hardin. Down the long drive sat the school bus, with Mr. Ratner waiting.

Steady step after steady step Susie continued to the front door. Not exactly fuming, she was cross to think that her mother was supervising her, even if at a remove. Certainly, her teachers and the various shopkeepers and neighbors all seemed stirred up. They'd been speaking to her kindly and too often, and she'd assured them of her fineness, her complete fineness, without the least display of impatience. Her father had long ago explained that adults felt obligated to express concern, especially in front of each other, and that it was important to seem appreciative.

But Mr. Ratner was not indulging himself in a public show. He only waited. Susie viewed him as a reasonable being, whatever Mrs. Vick said, and decided his warning referred to the predicted storm. It made sense. Let a door blow open and winds would invade the old house, driving out every hint of warmth. The icy rain would soak the throw rugs and the curtains and put a pervasive damp on the house.

If she didn't mind her doors.

Susie pulled the front door shut and listened for the catch. She checked, too, the latches on the windows. No storm would unseat them. Off in the distance the diesel engine finally sounded.

The remainder of the day, the *whole weekend,* was hers.

Her settled routine—and she was surely a creature of habit—was to nap in the study downstairs, then make dinner, do her homework, and go to

bed. Sometimes she read or played old computer games. There were plenty of calls, too. She got her share, having a kind of baffling popularity. Sally Best sometimes, or Reina Harding, or Travis. Sometimes other girls. Cell-phone coverage was on and off, far more off than on, so the family mostly relied on the old landline. Most days it burred softly for Susie's attention, time and again. But not this afternoon. This afternoon the phone was silent.

Her mother would call in two days, on Sunday, at six. She called each Wednesday and Sunday. Same time. To see if Susie needed money, to ask how things were going, to annoy Susie with questions. To tell her more than she wanted to know. Supposedly, the weather was terrible and the hospital food passable. Supposedly, Susie's father was "improving."

Travis didn't call and Susie was a trifle affronted. Most days, she could barely get to the bathroom before the phone burred and there was Travis, wheedling for a visit to her parentless house. But today there was no begging. She shrugged. This was the age, her mother said, when it was girls one minute and trucks the next.

Her bag of books on the kitchen table, the bathroom visited, Susie trailed into the study. She fumbled with the doorknob, pulling the door closed behind her, then lay down on the firm couch with its small pillows, clutching her grandmother's afghan to her new-born bosom. The absence of her parents, although in some ways a relief, seemed to make her sleep more than usual; sometimes she wanted to hibernate through the quiet of her beloved winter until all was green again.

The couch was right across from the door to the study, against a warmer inside wall, and it tended toward the cozy. Tiredness overwhelmed her. She slept.

Dreaming, she saw her father staring at her from a hospital chair, having refused a bed. He was surrounded by machines and bags of fluid hanging from metal stands, with tubes running into his arms and down his throat, another tube slackly extending from under the skirt of his plaid bathrobe. An invincible being made helpless. Except for the short rifle across his lap.

Time passed. Maybe less than an hour.

"Mind your doors." It seemed that Mr. Ratner's half-child voice was in her ears, but no, it was not his voice but the sound of the doors themselves.

Her body was stiff as she awakened, every muscle tight to snapping, her jaw so rigid it hurt. With some surprise, it came to Susie that she was afraid, more afraid than she'd ever been before in her life. But she did not know why. She felt a weakness in her legs.

She opened her eyes in the late afternoon darkness and saw the study doorknob slowly turning, this in a house where no one else should be. Someone was there, five or six feet away. Someone uninvited, but there all the same. A visitor, come to violate her mother's ordinances in this cold and silent season. But perhaps her visitor had not been all that silent. As the

knob kept turning, stalled in the midst of an unkind eternity, Susie concluded that her unsleeping animal self, the one her father often invoked, must have heard something, but heard it too late. Thin ice crunching. The swollen scrape of the front door over the old boards of the porch—the same door she had carefully closed but never thought to lock. Or maybe her unsleeping self heard stealthy footsteps crossing the front room. No matter. None of it woke her in time to reach the study door.

With a near-frozen detachment, she noted that her body had known enough to be afraid well before her mind caught up to the danger, and that she was now panting and felt an almost overwhelming desire to urinate.

For Susie never doubted what was on the other side of that door. People did not simply drop by her unwelcoming home. This presence was a transgression. This was no kindly family friend, no neighbor checking up at her mother's behest. No sigh of relief would erupt once the door was open. Behind the door was the considering gaze.

The turning knob hit the lock and stopped, causing time to once again run at normal speed. Half by accident, half by design, possibly for the first time in her life, Susie had locked the study door. She thought to bless Mr. Ratner, and held back. For whoever it was on the other side of the door did not release the knob. Instead, he (oh, and this was surely a "he") kept hold, probably thinking over the old door and the possibly frail pieces of metal that might serve as a lock. Susie desperately turned her head to confirm that the gun cabinet was locked. Her mother insisted, and her father all too readily agreed, for safety's sake.

It was too bad, she thought with eerie calm. She could have been locked and loaded in no time.

The doorknob began turning again, faster this time.

Her father's calm voice came into her head, clearly remembered.

"Reputation notwithstanding, predators are absurdly cautious, absurdly careful to avoid danger. Unless they're starving or in rut, and even then they startle easily."

Blink, blink, blink. A message she'd earlier ignored. On a side table sat an ancient answering machine attached to her parents' landline, and the red light announced endlessly that someone had called. As the knob struck and struck against the lock, Susie leapt up and hit the button, bringing on her mother's recorded voice.

"Susie? Susie? What's going on?" The voice sounded friendly.

"There's someone here, Mom! Someone's in the house. Call the sheriff. Call the Cambers." Susie hit the "Stop" button, fearful that her mother's next few recorded words would undermine the deception, might ask about broccoli or plumbing, reveal that no one was there to hear Susie pleading for help.

A rush of footsteps. An object dropped to the floor and rolled. The front

door smacked hard into the outside wall behind it. The porch creaked, one, twice, three times.

Trying to control her breath, Susie picked up the landline to make her own call, suddenly aware that she could not recall the phone ringing since she got home. Yet it was still a shock to hear dead air, and for two or three seconds she could not think or move.

Moving slowly, Susie checked the connections and tried again. Nothing. While it was possible the lines were simply down, it was more likely the line had been cut or pulled. Easy enough for an intruder to do. So, if he knew the line was down, why had her visitor run?

It came to her as her eyes swept over her cell phone. Her area was a notorious dead zone, but once in a while a call got through. Her visitor must have mistaken the tinny-sounding old answering-machine recording for a cell-phone call, on speakerphone. Probably, if her visitor was an out-of-towner, a halfdrunk weekender bored with the usual hunt, he was gone for good.

But Susie's understanding of events did not tend that way. A weekender would have worried about a father or a mother, maybe someone armed. Not her visitor, though. Her visitor was unfraid. Knew Susie was alone. Knew the guns were locked up. Knew that a downed landline would isolate her.

She tried the cell phone just in case. Nothing.

The fear returned in an unexpected wave. It was tempting to hunker down in the study, to camp out there until her mother called the sheriff on Sunday night or the school started to worry about her on Monday. Her training was better than that, though.

Again her father's voice, more heard than remembered, and tinged with disdain.

"To survive, most prey pursue the limited tactics of concealment, retreat, or defensive position. They need to hide, to get away, or to put themselves beyond reach. Patience on the part of the predator defeats any of it."

Susie's mother did not share her husband's disregard for prey or his determinism. Her ideas were broader regarding the possible outcomes of a hunt.

Susie saw a baby rabbit once, cornered inside the barn by their long-gone tom. To her surprise, the rabbit screamed and screamed in terror as the cat ran at it from first one direction, then another. In the end, the tom skidded off in the wrong direction, giving its toy a chance to escape, or a seeming one. But the kit was overcome with fear, or knew the chance to be false. The rabbit ran nose first into a corner and stayed there, trembling. Disquieted, Susie at last picked it up, just as the cat crept close again.

"Why are you doing that?" asked her father sharply, reaching for the rabbit, seeing it as the tom's fair prey. For once, Susie could not speak, could not answer, could only turn and turn, trying to keep the rabbit out of

her father's long reach.

Her mother was abruptly between them, looking at Susie's father, her face full of *Don't.*

"Maybe," she said in a warning voice, "the rabbit got lucky."

"Marybeth...."

"You cannot kill what is not yours." It sounded like the beginnings of a curse and her father had dropped his eyes and stepped away.

Mother and daughter had borne the rabbit, quiet now, off to a clearing deep in the woods, a hidden place generous with grass and rife with rabbit holes old and new. The kit grew up and grew old and its great, great grandchildren now populated that glade. Susie knew this because a white spot special to the turned-luck rabbit showed up in half the warrens on their land. Sometimes she thought she saw the rabbit himself, in glimpses.

Back to the moment, Susie wrenched open the study door, wielding a dull letter opener in her left hand. There was no movement in the living room. Nothing. Across the floor, the front door was hanging open, and it was almost sundown. She felt cold air on her face and saw a rectangle of trees shuddering across the clearing, maybe from wind.

Her father's voice came to her, fully alive.

"Of course, some that startle off, come back."

Swinging her head back and forth, scanning the room, she stopped dead, her eyes fixed on what her visitor had dropped. The object was in the middle of the floor and resembled a small dark-grey wheel.

It didn't make sense, at first. After several seconds it came into focus as a full roll of duct tape and all that stopped Susie from screaming was an image in her head of a figure wakened to action and roaring full tilt from out of the woods.

She knew, oh, she knew, what the duct tape was for, and what it meant. That restraint would make of her an object, a thing unable to either fight or flee. She knew, also, that the winter visitor, in the grip of his compulsions, must surely return.

Susie dropped to all fours and began crawling across the living room, lowering her profile. Stuck in her head was a vision of her father with his marionette's mouth nipping at words that escaped him over and over, but she could not make sense of that or anything else. She was discombobulated. The tape had discombobulated her. But the front door remained wide open and there was really something she should do about that.

She crept across the living room, sweating, her palms picking up grit and tiny bits of bark. Muttering over and over that there wasn't anyone else in the house, that the rarely used back door did not stand open behind her, that there was no movement in the house. None but hers. The tips of her fingers brushed the wheel of tape and it almost made her sick. She thought

maybe she'd lock the front door and crawl back into the study, maybe barricade it.

One thing was different. At first, she hadn't paid any attention, but down on the floor there was no ignoring it, for her sense of smell was acute. A man's cologne was heavy in the air, mixing ugly with sweat. That was it. Susie knew the mix, had smelled it before.

Susie scuttled to the door, imagining herself as a bug beneath a hovering rock, and reached up for the knob, hesitating. That smell again. Stronger yet. Looking down, there were oily spots on the white paint of the threshold and she dragged her fingers through them, her usual distaste drowned out by fear. It was not blood. Nor oil, nor anything worse. It was that cologne again, spilled onto the sill. There was a tissue, too, discarded at the edge. She leaned close. It was discolored and stank of sweat, as if he'd wiped his nose, then reached under a shirt and dragged it through an armpit or two. Disgusting.

Her mind cleared and outrage began to take the place of terror.

Her visitor had stood in the doorway, unwashed and sweating, and doused himself with cologne, bathed in it like a boy who didn't know any better. He'd also used the tissue for two separate and disgusting things, which was not done, and dropped it where he stood, which was also not done. Then there was the grit and the bark to consider too. Her visitor had not wiped his feet on the mat, the commonest and most automatic of courtesies. Instead he'd waltzed into the Newland house smelling fit to make a person's eyes water, and done it with dirty boots too. Then he'd dropped his duct tape and skittered at the sound of Marybeth Newland's voice. A regular romantic hero, as her mother would say.

As she thought it over, her father's final word unfolded into a course of action. Besides, it was no good to leave the house, not for a few hours anyway. He could be in the woods, or on the road. Him with his dirty boots and his flowered-over stink.

Susie stood up and matter-of-factly locked the doors and windows, nodding. None of it would keep back a determined assault, but breaking down the door or shattering the windows would make noise and give her time.

Up the stairs she went, to the tidy attic with its secret things. She carried a bag from the study, and was fast and certain, listening carefully while she worked, hearing only the breathing of the house in winter.

The terror was gone, but the danger remained.

An hour passed, two. The sun went down and Susie stood watch at the one tiny window in the attic, knowing that if the winter visitor worked his way to the back of the house she'd have a minute of warning at most. But there it was. She had to pick one vantage point and this was the best.

Eventually, she dozed, more than dozed. Might have slept till noon, tired

as she was. Then there was inhuman clattering on the porch and her heart rose up in her throat. Standing, she looked down and saw a nervy deer, come from the woods. It was eating old cereal she'd put out for the squirrels.

She wanted to shoo the deer away, but dared not give up her location. The deer ate on and clattered away in its own good time.

As it grew later and much colder her confidence increased. The winter visitor wouldn't want to take chances. He'd want to be fit and free for the next hunt, and the next. Maybe visit the main restaurant, where the deputies ate and yakked. Listen for trouble at the Newlands'. It would be the talk of the town, surely, if she'd gotten through a phone call. But soon enough he'd guess the truth. Of course, by then he would be full and warm and would go home to set his clock to a virtuous hour. He'd think his little rabbit would be shaking away in her corner, fearing the woods, hoping to be saved.

Or he could be out there under the cold winter moon, she reminded herself. Nerving himself up.

It was late when she left the house, and the moon was low in the sky. Susie slipped from a side window, one on the east, and worked her way around the back of the house, staying to the trees at the edge of the clearing. Her mind was clear, her nerves were back. But it made little difference. Every shadow was a monster, every branch was a reaching hand. The world was full of knives.

She paused halfway through, thinking. She could cut through the northern woods and fields and be at Travis's house in an hour or so. Let herself be saved by sympathetic adults who would half-believe the intrusion was her imagination. Or a harmless prank. Back at the house she would begin waiting for the doorknob to turn again. Someday, probably, it would. She thought of Reina Harding's cousin, strangely afraid for months, the Beckus twins in the next county, and what they saw at the window. The three of them. Gone. Others too. Her father was right. Too many. Too many for it to be the quarry or drugs.

Susie picked up the visitor's tracks, coming off the clearing and onto a deer path. He'd come walking, left running. There was a flattened spot in the snow a few feet back where he'd waited, including a balled-up soggy tissue against the base of the nearest tree. She kept her eyes on the tracks and followed, not walking on the path itself, but through the trees to one side. With luck, he'd never see *her* tracks, not in the clearing, not along the deer path. Long minutes passed, but in time she got to the U-shaped turnabout on the edge of her parents' land. It was empty, but populated with footprints.

The footprints indicated a big man. Yup. He'd run scared and not come back. Probably, once he got over being spooked, he'd make sure it was safe

for another try. He might come back tonight, but he'd already put it off later than he needed to. So probably not tonight. He was a weekender at heart, this one.

Moving slowly she disappeared back into the forest. It was very, very cold and she was grateful for it. If he'd ventured the cold, if he'd been smart, he'd have waited for her in the woods back of the house.

The rest of the night was long, but only because she was waiting.

The winter visitor returned later than she expected. Long after the sun rose. It made sense when she came to understand that, like her, he was a creature of habit. That he probably got up at the same time every day, no matter what.

At 8:15 in the morning, with the winter sun shining down, a smiling man walked out from between the trees, into a good-sized clearing along the deer path. He must have parked at the bottom of the turnabout, as he had before. His nose was pink and he stopped to blow it once or twice, each time dropping the used tissue onto the snow. Susie thought about DNA and wondered why he didn't even bother to clean up after himself.

The man, her visitor, was wearing big rolls of duct tape on his wrists like they were bracelets. He carried a rifle slung awkwardly on his back, with an air of pretense.

It was her Math teacher, Mr. Young, and his eyes were alight with merriment.He was dragging a weeping Mr. Ratner along by the scruff of the neck, slinging the smaller man around without much effort. He'd drop Mr. Ratner whenever he paused to blow his nose, then grab him up again, like a bag of laundry.

She remembered, now, how Mr. Young stank and how he covered it with cologne, and she could see the unthinking animal vigor that didn't show up in the classroom. He was her father's age and sinewy under his polo shirts. He was a man who laughed too late and at the wrong things, and people kept their distance.

"Smart enough, I know, but that Young. He's not right. He's just not right." This was said by an old uncle, Hosea, town crier of the embarrassing. The old man nobody listened to.

What else did Hosea say? That it wasn't always the damned quarry?

"They're so many," he'd say, trembling from the Parkinson's.

An image came to her, of Mr. Young elbowing Mr. Ratner, hard, as if they shared a joke only Mr. Young found funny. This happened once at a school party and again as everyone stood in the town square for fireworks. The two of them were cousins, however mismatched, so the grownups saw, but did not meddle. Because it was a family matter.

As she watched from her hiding place, Mr. Young did it again, driving his elbow into the bus driver's ribs and grinning as the small man clutched himself around the middle. Then Mr. Young sneezed into the air, without

covering his mouth.

He leaned over the cowering Mr. Ratner.

"Oh, you'll like it. It'll be fun."

He began to sing, his good cheer a terrible thing.

"Mind your doors or I'll bind you whores, and I'll lub you like you never..."

Mr. Ratner began to struggle. Although he was a slight man, the struggle was fueled by outrage and it was getting harder for Young to control him.

"Not fun! Not! Lemme alone!" His child's mouth went stern. "I'll tell! About the quarry!"

"What do I always say? No one will listen."

"I'll tell anyway." This was said softly, but it carried. It was no idle threat.

Recognizing this, Mr. Young's face went blank and he cocked his head.

Mr. Ratner pulled himself away and stood as tall as he could. He gave forth with a single dirty look, turned, and began walking back toward the trees, rocking from side to side, his damaged gait oddly righteous.

Mr. Young shrugged and reached backward to grab his rifle, pausing to sight it on Mr. Ratner's back. He was clumsy with his weapon, but Mr. Ratner was only a few feet away.

The bus driver turned and promptly began screaming with his hands over his mouth, making a smothered sound, too panicked to duck into the trees.

Mr. Young took a moment to firm up his inexpert grasp on the rifle.

"You are no fun anymore, Jerry."

There was a flat bang and Mr. Young went down tidily, reminding Susie of a building felled by controlled demolition. Mr. Ratner's screaming cut short, too, with a kind of finality. He did not gaze around, as might be expected, but instead stood awestruck, as if the other man had been felled with lightning flung by a weary minor god.

Of course, it wasn't lightning. It was a bullet from a forgotten and neglected Mannlicher-Carcano bolt-action rifle, fired from her father's favorite deer blind, a platform in the Y of a tree, with clean line of sight to the clearing. Unfortunately, the shot went a little low.

Years ago, her father and she stole away up to the attic, creeping while her mother slept. There, Father showed her the pariah rifle, enfolded in soft cloth, where it lay, dry and untouched in an old trunk. It seemed unremarkable to her. She'd been very little and the Carcano's existence slipped her mind. But not her father's. With his last word of warning, he'd sent her to the one weapon the Newlands never locked up. Manufactured in 1940, hidden away in 1963, it had lived in the Newland attic for half a century, too taboo to use or sell. Banished, then nearly forgotten. Cast out for a murder done by one of its brethren.

"Jerry."

It was her math teacher, speaking through a mouth full of blood. It startled the bus driver and it carried yards away to the deer blind, where

Susie tensed, thinking that, if a second shot were necessary, the sheriff would not lay the blame on a stray and drunken weekender, as he so often did.

She'd considered firing from the attic, a hunt being riskier. But the angle would have been tough to explain, even if she could move the body away from the clearing. Easier to blame it on buck fever, on some fool firing through the trees who might not even know he'd shot another hunter.

"Jerry. Help me."

Mr. Ratner took a reflexive step forward and then his innocent face hardened, allowing a brief glimpse of the man he would have been. His face grim and unforgiving, he turned away and limped heavily into the forest. Even Mr. Young seemed to approve.

Susie picked up her single shell casing and folded her father's deer blind exactly as he would have done. She swept the crumbs from a granola bar off the low platform and climbed down, making sure of each step, controlling her weapon as she'd been taught.

It was snowing hard now, the winds picking up. The promised storm was late, but it was coming on hard.

Seeing her standing over him, the clear victor, Mr. Young produced a guilty and endearing smile, as if he'd taken the last piece of cake and was going to settle this with a wink and an apology, instead of by dying.

"If," he gurgled, "if you head up the triangular hill by the Martins' main field, get right on top of the mushroom-shaped rock, you can get a call out."

She looked him in the eye, very directly.

"No."

Firmly now, after spitting out a scarlet mouthful, he gave her instructions. As if he were talking about the algebra final.

"The hill. Or you'll get in trouble. They'll lock you up.

"No."

Astonishing her, he roared and rolled over onto his knobby arms, flinging off the rolls of duct tape, rising up to stand on his knuckles. He dragged himself toward her, walking on his fists, dragging his legs, the blood pouring from his mouth and spreading out behind in a plume over the layer of snow and ice. His teeth, his very ordinary teeth, were reddened and bared, and this made him unrecognizable.

Susie kept backing up the hill until he collapsed, coughing, red drops fanning out across the new snow.

He raised his head and blood began to fill his mouth again, and there was regret on his face as he looked her up and down.

Wistfully, his voice liquid, he said:

"I would have had *the whole weekend."*

The snow was falling faster and faster, landing on the rifle, landing, too, on his arms and legs. She stared down at the visible quarter of his face with

its single blinking eye, until the snow began to cover his face and his pink nose, and he could no longer shake it off.

In the distance, there was a volley of gunfire, and he roused one last time, a little snow falling off, his tone oddly conversational.

"Did you think I was the only one?"

The quality of his stillness changed after that and a layer of snow quickly covered him. Susie knew, then, that he'd been lying in wait up until the moment he spoke his final words.

Never getting within reach, no, not even now that he was so nearly a corpse, she collected the rolls of duct tape and dropped them into a hollowed-out tree, dropping them into the empty space where the core had been. Snow kept falling and the clearing seemed to grow cleaner as the blood disappeared beneath it.

Movement off to the side made her swing the rifle, bringing it to bear on a white-spotted rabbit who'd moved onto the path, watching her. Fair prey. Blood lust fought with her self-control.

"No," she said, lowering the rifle.

Mr. Young, reduced to an odd shape under the snow, gave forth with an enormous reverberating death rattle, then stilled. The rabbit fled the clearing and the girl walked away, stiffly walked, and never looked back.

Several days later, while the sheriff and the deputies were looking for Mr. Young, before they searched his house and found what they found, before the hysteria flared up and burned through the town, Susie looked up to see the doorknob to the study turning until it hit the lock.

He had a key, though, a key immediately to hand, and it never would have crossed his mind to knock.

The door swung open and there stood Susie's father braced on a walker, not reacting much to having the Carcano pointed at his chest.

"Your mother's in the car."

"Mother said she met you at the quarry. The first time. You were hunting. You were this strange guy who wouldn't talk."

A micro expression was there and gone, leaving behind his cold and unmoving face.

"Yes," he answered.

"My math teacher. Who else?"

He did not answer, instead he stared off into an unimaginable distance, holding hard to the bars of the walker.

Susie spoke very clearly into the silence.

"If you ever hurt her, I'll kill you."

He nodded in complete understanding.

To the immense surprise of everyone but Marybeth Newland, the doctors had divined a cause and administered a sort of cure. It involved an astonishing number of pills that tended to work less well over time. But while

Floyd Newland would never again go on a particular hunt, he could walk after a fashion and keep or reveal secrets, could confess or go unshriven, and could only remember more and more as hunting seasons came and went.

He knew everything, Susie reflected. He knew nothing.

She lowered the Carcano. The two of them stood and looked at each other.

In the living room, the front door swung open and hit the wall with a bang.

"Hi, honey!"

Her mother was home.

# TED BUNDY'S FATHER

***by Ruth Graviros*** | 7744 words

**Art by Jason C. Eckhardt**

**Ruth Graviros was one of several pseudonyms used by *EQMM* editor Eleanor Sullivan when submitting her own work to this magazine. The practice began when she was managing editor under Frederic Dannay, and was meant to assure there would be no bias in determining the quality of the submission. It continued when Eleanor became the magazine's editor, but then it was her own assistants who evaluated the disguised submissions. This was her last story for *EQMM;* it was nominated, in 1990, for the best short story Edgar. For more on Eleanor Sullivan see p. 82.**

With his tendency to tune out the distasteful, Warner Chadason couldn't remember when he'd first heard or read about Ted Bundy. He'd had little personal experience with crime in his sixty-four years—the hit-and-run death

of a classmate when he was in grammar school, a series of petty thefts on board ship when he was in the Navy, the burglary of the first house he and Jane had rented when they were married, the nonfatal shooting last summer of the manager of the store where they bought their liquor out on Route 138.

Except for several brief skirmishes in the North Atlantic in 1944, he had enjoyed an unthreatened life, growing up in an affectionate, comfortable home in the same serene town on the Rhode Island coast where he now lived. His parents and his middle brother were gone, marriage had taken both sisters to distant parts of the country, and his oldest brother, a retired violinist with the Rhode Island Philharmonic, lived in Providence.

Warner's enthusiasms had always been simple. Beyond bringing up a family and his work as a marine biologist, he enjoyed reading, music, and fixing things. Wherever he'd lived since he was a teenager, neighbors had called on him for help with mechanical problems. Far from resenting it, he was sorry when lack of time sometimes made it impossible to see a repair through himself. He savored the hour or so with Jane over drinks before dinner every evening, neglected his health a little, and avoided television, aware that with his passive nature he could easily watch to excess. One evening when he'd discovered himself idly watching *Wheel of Fortune* with Jane and their visiting daughter Pat, whose husband was teaching an evening class, he jumped to his feet, said, "Let me out of here," and headed for his study. "Too much for you, Daddy?" Pat said. Jane laughed. "Can't take it, eh?"

So when *had* his awareness of Bundy begun? The question of capital punishment had always been a bone of contention between Jane and himself. Maybe it was during one of their disputes about it. He was against the death penalty, no matter how horrible the crime or the criminal. "It's not a civilized solution, it doesn't address the problems these people are acting out," was his unequivocal stand. He did recall one evening early in the fall, the appetizing aroma of the lamb roast in the oven urging them toward one last drink before moving to the table, Jane spoke of Ted Bundy as if Warner naturally knew who he was. "If we lived in another part of the country," she said, "one of the girls, or all three of them, could have been his victim. I think you'd feel differently about it then."

Pat was thirty-five, Susan was thirty-three, and Elaine was twenty-eight. "They would have been exactly the right age and type of most of Bundy's victims when he was on his rampage in the seventies," Jane said.

"The right type?"

"Intelligent, attractive, kind."

Warner frowned. "If I did go for the death penalty because any of the girls were his victim, it would be because I couldn't be impartial."

"You can't keep your distance from such an important issue because it hasn't happened to you!"

"I'm not saying the man shouldn't be locked away for the rest of his life. I'm not even concerned about whether he lives or dies. But taking his life makes monsters of *us.* And it won't bring back his victims."

"He *has* been locked away, Warner, and he's escaped twice. In Colorado he jumped out of a second-floor window in the courthouse where he was about to go on trial, and later, when he was recaptured, through the ceiling in his jail cell. And he went on to Florida and killed and hurt some more young women. The ones who lived will never be the same. And even now on Death Row, they have to keep changing his cell because of his attempts to escape. It's all a game to him. Killing the girls was just the beginning. He's playing games with everyone: the police, the press, the psychiatrists, the courts, the taxpayers—"

Jane was the most persuasive woman Warner had ever known. When she walked into the lab at Woods Hole back in 1949 as a summer intern from Vassar, he'd known she'd be capable of dissuading him from some long-held convictions—which she had, for the most part painlessly. It was possible, he sometimes thought, that he'd married her as much for that quality in her as for the powerful physical attraction between them.

Her insistence on planned parenthood as a requisite to their marriage was a case in point. She wouldn't consider starting a family until they had sufficient means to give a child a healthy start in life. It was essential not only to their peace and happiness, she said, but to the peace and happiness of any children they would have—even to the peace and happiness of the community. "The unwanted child is the unwanted citizen," she'd concluded, never afraid of sounding the zealot. It was part of her passion. For all their reserved behavior in public and with the children, they were deeply passionate in private. He was, in his marriage, a very fortunate man, he knew, and Jane had made it clear every day of their years together that she considered herself as lucky as he did.

The children's slowness to marriage Jane attributed to the times—another judgment Warner could see to be true. His graduate students and the children of his friends and colleagues were definitely different in that respect from his generation. They seemed to fall in love just as haphazardly, but they were far more adept at protecting themselves from a chancy future. The cases of buck fever he'd witnessed back in the forties had no counterpart in the eighties.

Susan, their only child to marry young, was divorced and living in New Hampshire with her nine-year-old daughter Jess, not far from her former husband, whose lifestyle seemed able to accommodate little more than his carpentry jobs, skiing, drinking with his friends, and the occasional "quality time" with his daughter. Pat had married at thirty-two. She and Bill, who

taught drama at the university, were expecting their first child in March. Elaine, heedless of herself as the family beauty, so far seemed to thrive on her life as a journalist living alone in New York City. Over Thanksgiving weekend—which also happened to be the weekend of Warner's birthday this year—Tom, their fourth child, an associate professor in the humanities at the University of Chicago, had brought home a spirited young Dutch woman and announced their engagement at the holiday dinner. Meta was a psychologist with three years' more seniority on the faculty. Elaine declared herself to be delighted with Tom's catch but concerned that the weight of the family was falling so heavily toward the academic. "What's going on here?" she demanded.

"What can I tell ya?" Tom assumed *Saturday Night Live's* Dennis Miller's sweet smirk. "Knowledge is power."

"So think gossips and blackmailers too." She shook her face close to him. "And spooks."

"And journalists," her brother said, sealing it with a kiss to her resolute jaw.

Warner spent a good part of the day after Thanksgiving helping Mark Roper, who had a glamorous house out near the beach, repair the damage after a plumbing leak that had all but ruined the Ropers' holiday. There was a halfhour of daylight left when he drove in and saw Jane and most of the others settled in the old Adirondack chairs in the spacious fir-sheltered yard, bundled up in heavy jackets, drinking hot toddies. As he turned off the ignition and climbed out of the car, Jane poured from the thermos at her feet. "Welcome, pilgrim," she said, winding a cloth napkin around the glass and handing it to him.

"Hello, everybody." He took it from her to one of the empty chairs in the circle of conversation. Elaine was saying, "He murdered more women than we'll probably ever know. *He's* probably lost count."

"Don't you believe it," said Meta.

"When he was captured after killing that young girl in Florida, he told detectives he'd killed in six states, not four, and that they should add a digit to the FBI estimate that he was responsible for thirty-six murders."

"I wouldn't object to a change of subject," Jane said, taking the rubber ball Luther, the Labrador, had been holding in his mouth for her attention and tossing it toward the woods with a skilled arm.

"His is an amazing case of malignant narcissism." Meta's eyes behind her eyeglasses were bright. Did she know how pretty she was, Warner wondered, the blond braid below her handknit cap so careless and healthy and young?

"Have they any idea even now what's genetic and what's not?" Jane asked her.

"Ha. We like to think we know. In Mr. Bundy's case, perhaps being born a white illegitimate child in the U.S. in nineteen forty-six when extramarital sex was still taboo, and being raised first in a household where he was led to believe his grandparents were his parents and his mother was his sister, then at the age of three being taken from the couple he thought were his parents by the sister a long distance away, where she soon presented him with a new 'father, would prompt more than enough trauma to make any genetic factors irrelevant."

"Jack Nicholson grew up with that same mother-sister fiction," Elaine pointed out, "and he seems to have turned it into marvelous creativity."

Tom laughed. "He knows how to *play* malignant narcissism, for sure."

Elaine and Susan were pensive. "I wonder what makes the difference in how people react to desperate beginnings," Elaine said.

"The adults are involved, I would think." A breeze blew up and Meta looked reflectively at the swaying trees. "Even if they can't be honest with a child regarding the facts, if they really love the child and show it in appropriate ways it should make a difference."

They celebrated Warner's birthday with dinner at their favorite restaurant in Newport on Saturday night. Through Sunday, the days and nights remained crisp and dry, with an ongoing fire in the living-room fireplace, impromptu conversations everywhere to be found in the house. Only one of these, to Warner's knowledge, disturbed the tranquility of the weekend.

Sunday morning, while the others slept late, only Susan, who was an insomniac, was awake to share breakfast in the sunroom with Warner and Jane. Susan, cursed with depression most of her life, had grown increasingly moody and fractious since her exuberant arrival in her battered Volvo on Wednesday night.

"I can't wait to get back and see Jess," she said gloomily.

"We can't wait to see her at Christmas," Jane assured her. "Have another popover."

"'Have another popover.' My daughter finally comes up in the conversation and you say 'Have another popover.'"

"I'm sorry, dear. I can't say we've missed her this weekend as much as you must have, but believe me we'd have loved for her to be here. You know we wish you'd move back to Rhode Island."

"She needs her father, too."

"Yes, of course she does. Susan, if we haven't spoken of her as often as we might it's not a case of out of sight out of mind, it—"

"I feel so out of it with all of you, you know?" Susan glared at each of her parents in turn and then focused her misty-eyed anger at the stack of firewood on the drive outside the window. "Last night at dinner I could have barfed at the new bonding going on across the table between Tom and his

girlfriend and the old bonding going on between Pat and Bill—like they couldn't wait to get back to their respective beds to hash about the rest of us."

"You'll marry again," Jane said—as Warner wished she hadn't even before Susan turned on her, furious.

"That's so typical, Mother! I'm not talking about me, I'm talking about them! You think you understand more than you understand—like Tom's smug little *clairvoyant* from the Netherlands. She has all the same answers!" She returned her gaze to the driveway. "My dear brother's going to marry a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad." Then, with the eye contact of a great actress, she told them both, "I'll leave you to *your* bonding, I've got to pack." She started out of her chair.

"Oh, shut up." Jane reached for her wrist and brought her back down. "Susan, I know that when you hurt, you want to hurt. And I know your father and I have made mistakes as parents and we're still making them—"

"What? Just by being models of contentment?" Susan said sarcastically. "Don't be silly. How could I object to that?"

"You could object to it, dear, if your courageous choice of a husband didn't live up to your expectations. Sam was a decent choice. He's a good man. But he's apparently not ready to be a husband and a father, and he may never be ready. You've dealt with that beautifully—"

"Spare me."

"I'm not being condescending."

"Oh no? Spare me that too."

Warner pushed back his chair, brought his half-empty plate and coffee cup to the kitchen, and leashed Luther for their morning walk.

When they returned a half-hour later, Susan and Jane were still talking intensely but more quietly at the table. As Warner hung up his jacket in the mudroom, thinking of how and where and whether to escape, he heard Susan complain that she bore the brunt of Sam's desertion in Jess's eyes, that all mothers bear the burden of a child's blame when a father is abusive or indifferent or absent and there wasn't a *word* for the unfairness of it.

Jane worked as a volunteer two days a week at a local thrift shop, the proceeds of which fed half a dozen charities. She was an insatiable reader and donated, borrowed, and returned books every day she went in. Several weeks before Christmas, she looked up after dinner from a copy of a dogeared paperback she was reading, thought awhile, and said, "Bundy's game was easy for him to win because he didn't play fair. His victims weren't aware of the game—they hadn't been brought up to even dream they were being hunted when he came along in his well-mannered way with his casts and his crutches and asked for their help."

"What's this obsession everyone has with this guy?" Warner objected.

"Mass murder's a pretty morbid subject to begin with, and he's not the only one around."

"Well, for one thing he's due for execution soon. I should think that would be of interest to you, morbid as it is, you're so dead set against capital punishment."

Warner folded his newspaper closed. "What's the book?" He could see the author's name, Ann Rule, on the well-cracked binding from the distance, but not the title.

"It's called *The Stranger Beside Me.* The author's written other true-crime books and just happens to have known Ted Bundy since nineteen seventy-one when they were both night volunteers at a suicide-prevention clinic in Seattle. She was an unpaid volunteer, he was a paid work-study student."

"He was born in Seattle?"

"No, he was born in a home for unwed mothers in Burlington, Vermont, in late nineteen forty-six. His mother left him there alone for a few months, then returned to get him and bring him home to live with her parents in Philadelphia."

"And she pretended to be his sister," Warner remembered. "What about his real father?"

"His mother won't say, except that he was a sailor."

"There were a lot of us around then," Warner smiled.

"Abortion was illegal, of course, and anyway her family's religion forbade it. When she took him to Washington state, she started to use her middle name, Louise, instead of her first name, Eleanor."

"When did she tell him the truth about it?"

"She didn't. He knew something wasn't right—of course he would, a *sister* taking him away from his *parents?* When he was twenty-two he came back East and traced his birth to Vermont. He went to Burlington, asked for his birth certificate under her name before she married John Bundy out in Washington, and there it was. It had to be some kind of shock."

"I can imagine," Warner said—then, as Jane returned to the book, he thought, No. No, I can't.

As Christmas drew closer and the university suspended classes, Warner helped Jane with the usual errands. Tom was flying to Apeldoorn with Meta to spend the holidays with her family, but Elaine was coming up by train from New York, possibly with a new suitor (but probably not, she said), and Susan was driving down from North Conway with Jess.

One rainy morning, Jane's Olds wouldn't start and Warner drove her to the thrift shop on the Post Road. As she climbed out and reached back for the shopping bag of books she was donating and returning, he spotted the Ted Bundy book at the top. "Let me have a look at that before you return it," he said. That something inside him leapt at the prospect startled him.

That he was interested in reading it at all surprised Jane. "Do you want to pick me up at four-thirty?" she said, transferring the book from the bag to the passenger seat. "We have that heavy food-shopping to do."

He stopped at the lab for some papers and any mail, then drove home, made a cheese sandwich, poured a beer, and went to his study with the book.

Even reading comprehensively, Warner was a fast reader, and reading the book without skipping a detail, he was halfway through it by midafternoon. He had stopped more than once to study the eight pages of photographs of Bundy, several of his victims, the scene of one of the crimes, a police sketch made of him in 1974, mug shots of him in 1975. At his most bedraggled, his hair curly and brown, his smile open, he was more attractive than average, even appealing. Warner could see he'd be very easy to relate to and trust on first meeting.

He was 5'10", which was surprising since his mother—of whom there was no photograph—was only a few inches over five feet. The more Warner read about his pretensions, his loving Mozart and good wines and gourmet food, the more impatient he became with the superficiality of the man. And as he read about the murders he had been convicted of and confessed to, the sicker he felt about Bundy. When the clock told him it was time to pick up Jane, he was relieved to take off his reading glasses and put the book aside.

As he went to the door, he stopped to take a brief, uncharacteristic glimpse of himself in the hall mirror—tall, his crisp salt-and-pepper hair still abundant.

If Bundy's mother was so short, he reflected as he unlocked the car a few minutes later, his height must have come from his father.

When they returned from shopping, Jane heated the pizza they'd picked up for dinner and served it with a green salad and wine. Warner didn't mention the cheese sandwich he'd had for lunch. He'd never had a cholesterol problem, but he was aware he was pushing it.

After coffee, Jane began her serious holiday cooking. She would start with the desserts tonight and tomorrow, and when the holidays rolled around a week from now she would have frozen or wrapped enough hors d'oeuvres, casseroles, bread, cookies, and desserts to see friends and themselves into the new year.

By the time the ingredients were organized and the oven was on temperature, Warner, in his study, was on page 397 of *The Stranger Beside Me:*

"Ted loved *things* more than he loved people. He could find life in an abandoned bicycle or an old car and feel a kind of compassion for these inanimate objects—more compassion than he could ever feel for another

human being." For the first time, Warner perceived Bundy involving himself in a genuine interest, not one he manufactured to impress. The skills must have served him well in his escape attempts.

Forty-five more pages and he'd finished. From the kitchen came the sound of foil tearing, of the oven, cabinet, and refrigerator doors opening and closing. Luther was in a deep sleep across the threshold, where he perversely liked to lie. Warner thought awhile, then opened the book to study the photographs once again and to reread parts of the second chapter about Ted Bundy's start in life.

Eleanor Louise Cowell. The surname seemed familiar but far from certain. Her illegitimate boy was born on November 24, 1946. Even allowing for the widest obstetrical vagaries in a full-term birth, he was most likely conceived in February of that year.

In February 1946, Warner had spent his last weekend furlough prior to his discharge from the Navy in Philadelphia, off the tanker on which he'd spent most of his almost two years of college-interrupted service. Within the month, he was headed home to Rhode Island, a degree, and, five years later, marriage.

His left hand and forearm were heavily damaged because of secondand third-degree burns he'd suffered in a fall against a boiler during a heavy storm off Nova Scotia. But his sense of freedom at his imminent release had more than compensated for the pain. He and his best buddy, Alex Kessel, had signed off and begun the weekend together, but Alex, who was engaged to be married in May, went wild on the Friday night and spent most of Saturday sleeping off a whopping hangover in their hotel room.

After seeing to Alex's needs, Warner set out alone to see the city of brotherly love. In the hotel coffee shop, he ordered orange juice, scrapple (which he'd never had before), and eggs. He went on to the zoo, then to the Museum of Art. It was there that he'd noticed this tiny, dark-haired girl, first studying a painting and then studying him. She spoke to him first, asking him about his bandages. She told him how to care for burns and the importance of keeping them clean and the bandages dry. He thought she was a nurse at first, but she said no, she wasn't.

She hadn't, he recalled, answered any of his friendly personal questions in detail. She told him her name was Ellie—if she gave a last name it was lost to him. Remembering her and his feelings now, Warner was newly impressed by her strange secrecy and by the sadness of their predicament. She didn't know what to do with her day and neither did he.

He suggested a movie and then, if she had no other plans, dinner. She had no plans, she said—a movie and dinner would suit her fine. They walked to where she knew the nearest theater to be. *To Each His Own,* which neither of them had seen, was playing, and though it held no attraction for

him he could see she was drawn to it, so he reached for his wallet and paid for the best seats.

Afterward, he asked if she would be interested in a shore dinner and she said yes, she loved cole slaw, didn't he love cole slaw? Did he know it was sugar of all things that gave it that special taste?

The seafood restaurant they found was spacious and popular, with roomy booths and sawdust on the floor. They each had a cuba libre while they waited for their fried clams and although Warner couldn't actually remember what they'd talked about, he expected he'd done most of the talking and that it had been about his experiences on board ship, *his* interests, *his* aspirations. She wasn't shy so much as quiet and had given him the impression she preferred to listen and make the occasional—sometimes stupefying—comment.

She lingered so long over her ice cream and coffee, he guessed correctly that she was disinclined to go home and so he suggested that since the weather was on the mild side she, as a native Philadelphian, give him a walking tour.

First they observed the action on Market Street. Many servicemen during the war, Warner thought, had gone berserk on weekend leave because of the danger or boredom they were going back to—now they were going crazy for different reasons. The prospect of the real freedom soon to come, maybe, or the loss of their innocence or of their buddies—or, as in Alex's case, fear of a new commitment. He couldn't begin to say from his own experience what really drove the others.

From the busier streets, Ellie led him out past the length of Franklin Field to a college campus—which of Philadelphia's colleges another detail Warner couldn't recollect. It was while they were wandering there that she took him by complete surprise. They were alone on a path close to a dark two-story redbrick building when she faced him under a low-wattage streetlight, slid a hand under his pea jacket, under his winter middy, under his white T-shirt, and gave him an extended look that told him this was what the day had been leading to and that this was the place.

He followed her back around the side of the building and two steps up behind a row of white pillars to the deserted concrete terrace. Nothing about her previous, almost puritanical presentation of herself—her careful manners, the grey cloth coat over the black jumper and long-sleeved, high-necked white blouse—had prepared him for the ardor with which she met him, or the lust she evoked in him—a lust he'd never remotely, even in his loneliest fantasies, experienced until then.

The blank he draws now of almost everything that night after her climactic *"Oh!"* is terrifying. He does remember not seeing her home—at her insistence—and wondering if she could after all be married, or if it was his

uniform she was ashamed of. He vaguely recalls wanting to phone her the next day before he and Alex returned to the ship, but she had left him with no information and asked for none about him. Just as she had asked for no protection.

In 1969, while Ted Bundy was attending classes briefly at Temple University, a young woman was stabbed to death in the stacks of the library. Her murderer was never found.

In July 1971, in Burlington, Vermont, a young woman of twenty-four was beaten, raped, and strangled in her apartment. She had been working that summer at a motor inn directly next door to the home for unwed mothers where Ted Bundy was born twenty-five years earlier. The only indication that Bundy might have been in Burlington at the time, aside from his unaccountability elsewhere, was a notation in the dog catcher's records that someone named Bundy had been bitten by a dog that week.

Were Pennsylvania and Vermont two additional states Bundy meant when he laid claim to two in addition to Washington, Utah, Colorado, and Florida?

"You can't pronounce it centri *fugal* just because you want to," Elaine told Jess from her armchair. "It's cen *trifugal.* You have to pronounce words properly or you don't get no respect." Jess, tall for nine, sat posture-perfect on the floor by the still-aromatic Christmas tree, considering her aunt doubtfully. "Besides, cen *trifugal* is more fun to say."

"I don't think so."

Elaine bounced her head against the back of the chair. "What can I tell ya, Tom?" she addressed her absent brother. "Knowledge is painful."

"Why *I* don't teach," Susan said from where she lay on the sofa, a chic-funky felt hat crunched low on her head.

"Why I don't teach too," agreed Elaine. She smiled at Jess. "I just preach, right?" It was Monday afternoon, the day after Christmas. She would be getting an early train back to New York in the morning. Susan and Jess were staying until Friday. She pulled herself out of the chair. "Well, it's my last chance to see the Canadian geese down by the salt marsh. Anyone want to come with me?"

" *I* do." Jess was on her feet.

"I'm too comfortable," Susan told them, gazing into the fire and then at Elaine. "I'm sorry." Jess was already in the kitchen, asking if she could borrow her grandfather's binoculars.

"Listen, an outing for me is everyday for you."

"And vice versa."

"So when are you coming to New York again? I've got two bedrooms now. Come and go as you please."

"With Jess?" Susan meant that was unlikely.

"With or without Jess. Either would be wonderful."

She meant it, Susan thought as Jess and Elaine slammed out the back doors. She didn't like remembering how relieved she'd been to find that Elaine was alone when she and Jess arrived on Friday, but she was in a self-forgiving mood and conceded that she had barely recovered from the Thanksgivingweekend realization that the family was partnering out and she was being left behind. The first shall be last, etc.

Her father had been gone for hours, rescuing some students who had elected to stay over for the holidays and were having a problem at the lab. Her mother was concocting a fish chowder for dinner. The living room was a tangle from the day before. Maybe she could make herself useful and restore some order.

She rolled off the sofa onto her feet, taking off the hat, her gift from Elaine—from Putumayo, whose clothes Susan insisted were made with her specifically in mind. She looked around for a big box for the debris. The largest contained the portable fireplace her father had given her mother to make more comfortable the late-day and-night outdoor sits she liked so much. They might want to keep it in the carton.

Searching further, she found the box with her father's gifts to her—a covered trashcan for the kitchen, because of a problem she was having with mice, inside it an ultrasonic-sound device that was supposed to drive pests away. It would do. She began gathering the discarded wrappings into it, setting aside any genuine ribbon of usable length in case her mother wanted it. If she didn't, Jess would.

"Here, let me help," Jane said, coming from the kitchen and kneeling beside Susan, who was reaching under the tree to realign a tumble of gifts.

"I see Father did his Christmas shopping at Payson's Hardware as usual," Susan observed.

"Jess told us on the phone you have '*horrible* mice.'"

Susan shuddered. "They're making me paranoid. I'm all the time looking for signs of them. They're like tiny Houdinis." She stopped and looked at her mother. There had been an abstracted quality about her all weekend that Susan found disturbing. "Is there something wrong between you and Father?"

" *Wrong!"* Jane looked at her, alarmed. She slid some boxes around on the rug and stood up. "I've got to take out the bread," she said with a toss of the head that said "Come with me."

Lifting two hot loaves from the oven, a pair of quilted mitts on her hands, she said, "Something's bothering him. I don't know what it is."

"For how long?"

"A week." She started to glaze the bread with butter and gave Susan a wan smile. "Only a week."

"I hate to admit this," Susan said, inclining her head to her mother's

flushed cheek, "but I like it better when you're both happy." She moved across the kitchen to the table and sat. "What did these students call him away for, anyway?"

"Oh, just the autoclave again. They're not used to it. They were sterilizing the equipment for their tests and it malfunctioned. They were in a panic it was going to explode."

"Sounds familiar." How many times over the years Susan had heard her father on the phone saying, "Ground yourself well, unplug it, and I'll come by in an hour or so when it's cooled down."

"They keep building better mousetraps. When are they going to build a better autoclave?" Susan said. Then: "Don't they ever call on someone else to go fix it?"

"Why should they? He always says yes."

"Never be an expert." Susan took a pine branch from the arrangement in an old jar on the table and pinched the berries. "I have a streak of laziness two miles wide. Look at this family. I don't know where you got me."

"You don't?"

"I married Sam because I thought he was as lazy as me. In some ways he is, but he's up for every odd job anybody hands him. Wouldn't it be funny if I really married him because he's like Father?"

When Jess and Susan left at the end of the week, the house seemed not only emptier than usual, it seemed emptier longer. Warner's dark mood failed to lift and it seemed to Jane that the light had gone out of his eyes, that his skin was unhealthily darker. She wanted to suggest he see a doctor. It would have been ideal to be able to say it was time they both had a checkup, but she had had a thorough checkup as recently as September.

Late one evening toward the end of January, she came downstairs from an evening of estimating the taxes for the thrift shop and found him daydreaming in front of a dreary TV sitcom.

"What's on television?" she asked.

"Nothing too exciting," he said.

Ordinarily she would have clutched her heart and said, "Thank God," but he wasn't up for it and neither was she. Instead she went to the kitchen and brewed some tea for the *Eleven O'Clock News.*

In the middle of which Warner jumped from his chair with a stricken look, told her he thought he'd left an important matter unattended at the lab, he might be late getting back, put on his windbreaker, and was gone.

Dear God, she thought as the beams from the headlights flashed past the window, what now? What devil was driving him so far away from her?

With all the overhead fluorescents on and the night pitch-black beyond the windows, the laboratory was deathlike. Warner had shot the inside lock and

gone directly to the autoclave—the highly pressured, overworked soul of the place. The heat it generated was tremendous and most of the faculty and students were afraid of the damage it was capable of. He had seen some very mean burns from it and was himself wary of such accidents after his at sea all those years ago.

Forty-two years ago.

Ted Bundy was to die in the morning at the age of forty-two. It had been announced on the news, as he had expected it would be. What he had not expected was a videotaped interview with him made earlier tonight at the maximum-security prison in Florida. Wearing what looked to be a shrimp-colored T-shirt over a white long-sleeved jersey, his handcuffed hands clasped together in front of his mouth as he listened to the interviewer's questions, he didn't look that age. Nor did he appear arrogant. When the man interviewing him—a minister, did they say?—asked what he thought should be done about mass murderers like himself, he'd said, "Don't get me wrong, I don't want to die—but I think society should do whatever it has to do to protect itself." Was this a last-minute bid for mercy, Warner wondered, and was the claim he made about his obsession with hard-core pornography being the trigger for the killings as true as only he could know it to be, or was he playing yet another game with a world he did not love? Warner thought it was too simplistic an explanation for him killing as he did. He had to feel such an injustice had been done to him sometime in his life that he couldn't hurt enough to satisfy his rage.

People who favored the death penalty, it occurred to Warner, and those who put themselves on line for it seemed to share an inability to see beyond their terrible grievances. He was certainly no more merciful than Jane. Luckier, perhaps, in a kind of sightedness that either could see beyond what she saw or not as far. Watching the interview with her, he had known they would have to discuss it when the news was over and he couldn't bear the thought of it. Nor could he bear to watch the rest of the interview itself, reading the terror in Ted's face in spite of the medication he must have been given—his mouth had been dry as he gave his carefully deliberated answers. How did a condemned prisoner live through his or her last hours? How did those who loved them? Why were they put through the long night?

The books and articles he had read about Bundy and other mass murderers since he'd finished *The Stranger Beside Me,* in their attempts to shape some sense from their behavior, had only added to Warner's confusion. He was impatient when they focused on Louise Bundy as at the root of her son's pathology. Even though she had behaved peculiarly with Warner, even though she hadn't wanted any kind of protection, he couldn't excuse himself. True, she'd said no, but he could have insisted. That might have frightened her, but on the other hand she may have needed that kind of reassurance. He'd had an obligation to anticipate the possibility of a child

and to protect against it. These past weeks he had looked up James Agee's comment in one of his letters to Father Flye, the Episcopal priest whose long friendship with the author dated back to when Agee was his student at St. Andrew's School in Tennessee. Jane had quoted it to him back when the *Letters* were first published in the sixties.

"I very much trust in the blindness of nature," he'd written, "but there is a great deal in that blindness which is repellant too. Begetting a child is at least as serious an act as murder."

They had seen *To Each His Own* that same evening! Olivia de Havilland had won the Oscar for playing the mother of an illegitimate baby in the movie. He had thought it pure soap opera and had in fact fallen asleep through part of it. Ellie, this strange creature from some nether world like the Marianas trench, as he had since come to think of her, had had tears in her eyes when the lights came back up in the theater. But in the movie Olivia de Havilland had put the baby out for adoption—why hadn't Ellie? And why had she left Ted alone for two months at the Vermont home before returning to claim him and bring him to her parents' home in Philadelphia? In one of the books Warner had read, it was estimated that half of all our knowledge is locked in our first year of life. With his fate uncertain those first three months, no one to bond to, and God only knew what happening the remaining nine months, Ted's destiny and that of his victims could well have been decided by his first birthday.

"It's a tragedy for this court to see such a total waste of humanity that I've experienced in this courtroom," the avuncular judge who was the first to sentence Ted to death in Florida had said. "You're a bright young man. You'd have made a good lawyer, and I'd have loved to have you practice in front of me. But you went another way, partner. Take care of yourself. I don't have any animosity toward you—I want you to know that."

That his hours with Ellie had been born of a kind of mild desperation, Warner had only recently acknowledged, and that everything he remembered and read about Louise Bundy told him that marriage with her would have been disastrous, couldn't absolve him of his absence in the boy's formative years. If he had given him a grounding and Ted had become a monster nevertheless, Warner could consider laying more of the blame elsewhere, or on the system. As it was, he recognized now, he was part of the system. The man he had thought he was— considerate, rational husband, father, mentor, neighbor—did not really exist.

Had anyone been observing Warner from outside since his arrival, they would have wondered at his almost catatonic stance before the silent autoclave. But now they would see him straighten and seem to address the problem it presented.

When the unit had last malfunctioned in December, Warner, for reasons he hadn't fully admitted to himself until now, had repaired it only to meet its

immediate functional and safety needs. Several pipes and the gauge needed replacement rather than first aid. He should have ordered the new parts and seen them installed by now, but he'd done neither. So that now all he had to do was remove the faulty parts, work at the already frayed cord so that it was dangerously exposed, pour water on the floor beneath the unit to simulate escaped steam, plug in the cord, grasp the exposed section, and precede his son to Hell.

The digital clock by the bed read 5:10. Jane had phoned the lab and Warner's office at the university with no luck. She knew he could not have been at the lab and purposefully not picked up. Instinct also told her not to go looking for him or to call the children.

Was it possible that Warner was lost to her forever? It could be happening, she knew that without having the slightest inkling why, and all she could do was wait for the news from some policeman or learn that this was simply another of the morbid apprehensions that had been hounding her since her sixtieth birthday. There was that too, after all, to be considered in Warner's recent behavior.

She couldn't concentrate on anything but her thoughts. What Warner called "the great unread" in the bookcase by her side of the bed held no comfort for her tonight.

His ventures as a handyman, she thought. More often than not anymore they were an effort at keeping the peace in the families of friends and neighbors who had foolhardily entrusted their cars, TV sets, lawn mowers, and sewing machines to each other. In trying to restore these things to the condition the lender perceived them to have been, he hoped to restore the amiability of the community.

Luther, who had kept a restless watch down by the back door most of the night, came upstairs and in from the hallway, leaning his face on the comforter—comforter himself, his dark gaze over his greying muzzle perplexed and concerned. "I've got two labs now," Warner had told him when he was a puppy, "but only one named Luther."

"I don't know, Luther," she said to him now. "I'd tell you if I knew, but I don't."

All she did know was that Warner had bounded from his chair in the middle of the interview with Ted Bundy. Pore over that as she had, she couldn't for the life of her see any significance in it at all.

She was down in the living room with a cup of coffee, Luther all but on her lap, when she heard a car turn into the driveway shortly after seven. As Luther ran barking to the door, Jane closed her eyes against the life that seemed to fall away from her in her fear of hearing the doorbell. Then there was the sound of the key in the lock and Warner let himself in. Bending

wearily to hush Luther, he saw her. She ran to him from the chair and his arms closed around her. Hers encircled him in a grateful stranglehold.

In the pale cast of dawn, he had lost the name of action. But although he hadn't been able to end his life, he was left with serious doubt about the favor that would be to Jane. His recognition that all their life together had been a fool's paradise for him was not something he could shrug off. Had he had any conscience at all before he met her? Why had he aborted his plan for an accident? Did he not want to die? Had he not wanted to kill? Had he not wanted to be killed? There was that theory that those three elements are necessary for the commission of suicide, he remembered. Actually, he had no disposition for any of the three. More than that, though, the conscious thought that had stopped him was the certainty that Jane would know it had been no accident, however feasible it might seem to the police, the community, and perhaps the children.

He buried his face in her hair. They were both crying. And while she would probably never tell him why she was, he thought he knew. It would remain one of the few secrets they would ever have apart.

A few hours later on January 24, 1989, in a bar on the U.S. side of Niagara Falls, an observant stranger might have taken note of one of those ever-young, ever-attractive drifts, full head of curly hair, propped over a beer at the gummy counter, a loud, complacent woman at his side, both occupied with the news on the TV over the bar.

On the screen, crowds cheering a ghostlike white hearse moving through dawn light gave way to a replay of part of the Bundy interview of the night before.

"He sure was a good-looking guy," the woman said. "Just my type." She appraised her drinking partner. "He looks a lot like you, Gus. Look at him, Larry," she said to the bartender, "doesn't he look like Gus?" Larry checked the two faces out and agreed obligingly. "You could be father and son if you were older," she told Gus.

Gus smiled and stroked the stubble on his jaw, flattered at looking like the man on television and at being taken, as always, for younger than he was.

"Bastard never had a father," Larry commented, pouring himself the third cup of coffee that morning.

"My God, I can't get over it," the woman said, reaching for a cigarette. "You don't see a resemblance like this every day."

Just like her to go on and on about it, Gus thought, watching the dead man still talking on the television screen. And as he watched, the smile left his face and a penumbrous shadow fell across his calculating, worried eyes.

# FAN MAIL

## PASSPORT TO CRIME

***by Christiane Geldmacher*** | 2485 words

**Christiane Geldmacher works as a lecturer, journalist, and editor in Wiesbaden, Germany. Her first novel, *Love@Miriam,* appeared in 2012, from Bookspot Verlag; *Willkommen@daheim,* her second, will be published this year. This tale for *EQMM* won the 2015 Friedrich Glauser prize in the short-story category. It's appropriate for an issue dedicated to editors, for not only does the author run her own editing business, the story highlights some potential perils of the trade.**

***Translated from the German by Mary Tannert***

**Veitshöchheim, November 18**

Dear Martin Houbein,

You don't know me, but I know you very well. I've been following your acerbic, fastidiously researched columns in the *Würzburger Kurier* online for years now and can justifiably claim to be your greatest fan. I have also gained a certain modest fame in that capacity in our fair city—as you will discover if you ask around. Perhaps you've already noticed me? I respond to your columns diligently in the commentaries to the online issue of the

*Würzburger Kurier.* I used to write classic letters to the editor, but since the volunteers and interns could never resist the urge to edit them, I switched to the electronic version. It was a good decision. After all, that's the democratic thing about the Internet: These days, you can add your voice to a newspaper without the editorial staff even noticing! And without—though the exceptions prove the rule—being deleted right away.

But am I mistaken, or are you rarely online? Maybe you use a pseudonym? If so, would you tell me what it is? Surely you don't have any basic objection to the Internet? That would be a mistake, Houbein! You'd be missing out, believe me. You can make some very useful contacts there! I've only read one online comment from you, to my knowledge. If I remember correctly, you stated more or less directly that you're a bigger fan of wood than wires (that is, you prefer print to online). Isn't that a little premature, a little *old school?* After all, you're not *that* old!

But please don't misunderstand me: I'm not trying to talk you into anything. It would just make things easier for your fans to get in touch with you, the great newspaper columnist and author! For now, this letter is enough to kindle a correspondence, and we can be flexible about the rest. (For that, however, I need your contact information.)

Where should I start? All of us love your humor, your generous spirit, your imperturbability, your incorruptibility, your certainty, your self-control, and your equanimity! You're a brother in spirit to us! And you say things other people don't dare say. Your columns are entertaining, as biting as they are wicked. And that's the way it should be, considering the rapid decline of the language to which not just our youth is exposed, but even large parts of the public, decision makers and trendsetters! This makes you—and me, as I'll explain in a moment—outsiders in society. Someone like you, Houbein, still values accurate punctuation, the conditional, the preterite. I'm thinking of columns you wrote that linger in my memory, such as "Yearning for the Good Old Days" or "A Walk to the Cemetery." Oh yes, those of us who still appreciate language have to look out for each other, and in this respect, you can count on me to be your comrade in arms on the Internet. I'm fighting for you! Think of me as your bridgehead in the World Wide Web! We have enemies, you know. Have you ever Googled your name? Don't do it! It's not a pleasant experience; I can't recommend it.

As you can see, I'm writing you by hand, not at a computer. I think a person's handwriting says a lot about him, don't you? It's the first impression you get. (But don't leap to the wrong conclusion. I'm not as small-minded as my handwriting might lead you to believe; this letter is cramped so that it doesn't scare you off with its length.) From that point of view I almost have to be grateful that I'm forced to approach you in such a traditional, complicated way. After all, according to Google Maps we're only fifteen kilometers apart as the crow flies! You're practically around the

corner! I had no idea! Recently I acquired an e-bike so that I could manage the hills better, so it would be no trouble at all to visit you.

But let me tell you about myself—I don't want you putting this letter to one side before I've even explained the reason I wrote it. I was born in 1949. I'm a civil servant, married with two grown children and five grandchildren. My wife and I live a quiet life out in the country—enclosed is a map that shows our location to the west of you—where we supplement our income by selling gluten-free foods. (Well, to be precise, it's my wife who does that. Once we've gotten to know each other, my wife would be happy to explain her business to you over a cozy supper.)

I completed my doctorate at the University of Würzburg with a dissertation on Ludwig Wittgenstein and his language games. Let me digress a little here. Wittgenstein, whom we might call a free radical, came from a Viennese family of steel industrialists. He was a highly talented man, who worked, among other things, on aeronautics. He became depressed (three of his siblings committed suicide), wrote groundbreaking philosophical treatises, became a teacher, was a pedagogical failure, studied hemorrhagic shock, and died of a cancer diagnosed too late to cure. In terms of linguistic theory, almost nobody went further than Wittgenstein; his most influential work is the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations,* in which he contemplated language as a multiplicity of games that players are trained to play.

This theory was embraced by a number of authors, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and—in all modesty—by me. That's why my byline in the online issue of the *Würzburger Kurier* is JJWittgenstein (JJ for Josef Johann, Wittgenstein's middle names). Naturally, I'm journalistically active elsewhere in the country under this name too. Maybe someone on the editorial staff has brought my pseudonym to your attention? You see, I've been the initiator of a few meaningful debates, even if my involvement was officially denied by the editor-in-chief, so I can imagine you might have heard of me that way.

Could I ask you at this point what your position on Ludwig Wittgenstein is? You see, this is just one of the questions I'm looking forward to discussing with you. And as I write, I'm overcome with the spontaneous impulse, as the older of the two of us, to propose that we call each other by our first names, as friends, Martin, because I feel so close to you—not just physically in terms of the fifteen kilometers, but psychologically, as a brother in spirit. Well, that's settled, then! Thanks! It's much more congenial writing to you on a first-name basis!

But now I want to get to the point of my letter. Can't keep you on the edge of your seat, can we, Martin? I've thought of a project that could benefit us both. That's right; I'm proposing that we work together! The two of us should team up as journalists and be a bridgehead between the

Internet and print. Here's my unique selling proposition for you: I'll introduce you to the world of electronic and social media. Yours for me is that you introduce me to the world of newspapers and publishing houses. Nothing could be simpler!

Naturally, I've already got some specific ideas. I'm thinking of something like the Platonic dialogues. Yes, I know the idea isn't new, but as a format it has been used and varied time and again over the course of intellectual history. I'm thinking of the French philosopher Paul Valéry, for example—except that he held those dialogues more or less with himself. What a narcissist! The critics all rhapsodized about his *Monsieur Teste,* but it contains a fictitious letter from his wife Emilie that he wrote himself, full of admiration for his own mind and intellect. That sort of thing leaves a nasty aftertaste and ought to be filed away under the heading "When Men Write Too Much," but nonetheless, Martin, I've seized the opportunity to sketch out a few ideas for our Platonic dialogues:

—Primitive ideas/psychology
—The imperfect body/physicality
—The human being and the universe/amorality

If you agree, this is where you could join in as mediator: Would you be willing to offer the dialogues for publication to the editor-in-chief of the *Würzburger Kurier* online? I'll keep working on the concept, set up a fan page on Facebook, and try to organize a premiere reading in Würzburg. I think we should try to acquire a weekly column in the daily newspaper too. Wednesday would be good, in my opinion, since your other column appears on Friday. That would probably create an interesting reciprocal effect—you might even call it a *dialogue!—between* the Wednesday and Friday editions that would be interesting for the reader. I don't know how you see it, Martin, but in my humble opinion the Wednesday edition of the *Würzburger Kurier* online is lagging just a little, intellectually, and there's some room for improvement.

In terms of bookkeeping, we could split the proceeds 60:40 (since I'll be contributing both the idea *and* half the text). Since I'm a civil servant, I would prefer to run the whole thing through your bank account, otherwise things could become a little complicated for me.

For my new activity at the *Würzburger Kurier* online, I think I should be classified as a freelancer, perhaps with the prospect of being offered a slot as a regular freelancer. What do you think? Could you pursue the matter for me with the editor-in-chief or, even better, with the publisher? (Off the record: Recently I sent the editor-in-chief some words of disapproval in the form of a comment on his lead article, and I think he felt offended. I called several times, but I never got him on the phone. I'm not sure how to get hold of

him at the moment. You know, Martin, people just can't take criticism anymore. What's the use of such a thin-skinned editor-in-chief at the helm of the *Würzburger Kurier* online?)

Well, that's my idea! What do you think of it? I want to move beyond the Internet, and you need to get into it, so let's get together! We can outsource each other! I'll pave the way for you here, and you can do the same for me there. The idea would benefit the *Würzburger Kurier* too: It will increase its visibility on both sides of the firewall. We both know it's a tough market for newspapers these days, but you won't get anywhere with the same-old sameold, Martin, you have to think in new directions and find innovative concepts. There's no point in hiding from progress.

Now, about our little arrangement: If you take a look at my reader letters on the Internet, you'll get an idea of my style right away. If you could just print them out and take them when you go talk to the editor-in-chief (I didn't want to send you too much material all at once) and add a copy of my CV, that ought to give him a good first impression of me.

How long do you think it will take until I can expect a response from a) you, and b) the editor-in-chief? And would it be sensible at this stage of the game to arrange a meeting between us? As I noted, you live practically around the corner from me, and I would be very pleased to meet you! I find that joint plans can be much more expeditiously developed during a real conversation. My wife would welcome you anytime too! And if you have a girlfriend: Bring her along! Or a boyfriend? Bring *him* along! My wife and I are very openminded. (When I Googled you, I discovered you'd been divorced recently. I want to offer you my deepest sympathies—which, by the way, have already been published in a comment in the online issue of the *Würzburger Kurier*— regardless of the reasons for your divorce.)

Please feel free to answer in detail, maybe with a critical introduction to the internal situation on the editorial staff. I'm not very familiar with the hierarchies there; that's new terrain for me. We ought to avoid pitfalls like the one with the editor-in-chief recently. Obviously I've stepped on his toes once too often—even if, as I said, that kind of touchiness is counterproductive in a job like his. So please be frank, Martin. It won't help me if you beat around the bush! You're an insider; you have information I can't get otherwise.

So, how should we get in touch? A handwritten letter? That's fine with me! It goes without saying that a handwritten letter from you would be a great honor for me! I could even publish it on Facebook, so the others can see which way the wind is blowing. A letter from Martin Houbein, yes, indeed! I know a lot of people who'd start to wonder where they've gone wrong....

But naturally you can also answer via e-mail to JJWittgenstein@google mail.com; that's a little faster. Naturally, the most practical thing would be to create your own Web site. Then I could link it to my Facebook page and lots

of people could "like" it. And you ought to think about a Wikipedia article. You don't have one of those yet either, and it would increase public interest in us.

In conclusion, I don't mean to be sentimental, but writing you this letter was a big release for me! I'm glad I finally found the courage to approach you personally. And to think the right medium was an old-fashioned letter! But then, just imagine my surprise and excitement when I found out that you live practically right next door! An acquaintance of mine told me. It goes without saying that this seemed like more than just a lucky coincidence.

Now I'm looking forward to your answer. If my eyes didn't deceive me yesterday, your car was parked in front of your house, which means you're not on holiday and I can expect an answer from you soon.

My warmest greetings, as your good friend, and in the hope of a "summit" very soon, I remain

Your Arno Metz (aka JJWittgenstein)

Attachments:
—Summary of Wikipedia article on Ludwig Wittgenstein by Arno Metz
—CV Arno Metz
—Map to Arno Metz's house

*This document is part of Appendix 4 of the expert psychiatric opinion written by Dr. Lydia Strasser, Würzburg, of the defendant Martin Houbein, who provided this letter from the injured party, Arno Metz, as part of his discharge for his crime against the injured party. Up to the moment of the crime, the injured party, Arno Metz, had approached the defendant, Martin Houbein, more than ten times at home and at the* Würzburger Kurier, *had stayed at the same hotel four times in the course of lecture tours and readings, had harassed the defendant's girlfriend by telephone repeatedly, and, most recently, picked up the defendant's children from school without the knowledge of their mother, the defendant's ex-wife.*

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261 words

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